NATION

Govt bans J&K parties over terror involvement

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BUSINESS

Govt removes permit for AI model launches

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SPORTS

In-form DC looks to win maiden WPL title

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India to vote in 7 phases, results on 4 June

Model Code in place with immediate effect

Simultaneous polls to be held in Andhra, AP, Sikkim, Odisha

Assembly elections in J&K won't be held with LS polls

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Lok Sabha polls will be held in seven phases spread over 44 days starting 19 April in the world's largest election, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi eyeing a third consecutive term in office. Counting of votes will be taken up on 4 June.

The voting period for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, spread over 44 days, would be the second longest after the first parliamentary elections of 1951-52 that lasted for more than four months.

Announcing the poll schedule to elect the 543-member Lok Sabha, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar told a news conference on Saturday that over 97 crore voter.

While the Opposition INDIA bloc remains hit by internal bickerings, Modi, 73, is not just looking to stamp his electoral dominance in the country but is also chasing history looking for another consecutive victory that will equal the country's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's record.

Gyanesh Kumar, Rajiv Kumar and SS Sandhu during announcement of elections schedule in New Delhi on Saturday **PHOTO: PTI**

Polling will be held in all seven phases in three states--Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, all considered key states in the fight for electoral supremacy. The entire election process, from the announcement of polls on Saturday to the declaration of results, lasts 82 days. Asserting that BJP-led National Democratic Alliance(NDA) is fully prepared for the general elections, Modi slammed the Opposition as "rudderless" and "issueless" and expressed confidence about retaining power.

With the poll announcement, the Model Code of Conduct has also come into effect. Drone-based checking at borders, surveillance of non-chartered flights, a crackdown on misleading advertisements and fake news, and "ruthless" action against poll violence are also among the EC's strategies to deal with the four-fold challenge of "muscle, money, misinformation, and Model Code violations".

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge said this was "perhaps the last chance to save democracy and our Constitution from dictatorship". EC is expected to deploy 3.4 lakh Central Armed Police Forces personnel along with state police forces in the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections and the assembly polls in four states Seen by political watchers as the favourite to retain power for a third straight term, BJP has set itself an ambitious target of winning 370 Lok Sabha seats. On the poll schedule, the ruling TMC in West Bengal said there is no valid reason for holding elections in seven phases for the 42 seats in the eastern state, claiming that more phases help political parties with deeper pockets. *—PTI*

>>>More on Pages 2, 3 & 5

NAMMA B'LURU VOTES ON 26 APRIL

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

Lok Sabha elections in Bengaluru are scheduled to take place on 26 April. The results will be announced on 4 June. Voter turnout of 78,90,480 is expected out of which 31,74,098 vote from Bengaluru North, 23,98,910 from Bengaluru Central, and 23,17,472 from Bengaluru South.

According to data from the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, District Election Commissioner Tushar Girinath on Saturday said, "There has been a 92 percent increase in the total number of voters compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections." The City will have 7,154 polling stations, with Central Bengaluru having the highest number of polling booths, including 2,911 in Bengaluru North, 2,125 in Central Bengaluru, 2,118 in South Bengaluru, and 1,828 in Rural area. *—Salar News*

>>>More on Page 2

INDIA TO VOTE IN 7 PHASES. HERE ARE THE DATES

Phase	Date	No of States	No of seats (Total seats: 543)
Phase 1	19 Apr	21	102
Phase 2	26 Apr	13	89
Phase 3	7 May	12	94
Phase 3	13 May	10	96
Phase 5	20 May	8	49
Phase 6	25 May	7	57
Phase 7	1 June	8	57

RESULT ON 4 JUNE

VOTERS IN NUMBERS

96.8 cr total voters

49.7 cr male

47.1 cr women

1.8 cr first-time

88.4 L specially-abled voters

82 L voters are 85+ years old

19.74 cr young voters (20-29 year olds)

2.18 cr centenarian voters

48,000 transgenders

KARNATAKA FOCUS

State will vote in 2 phases

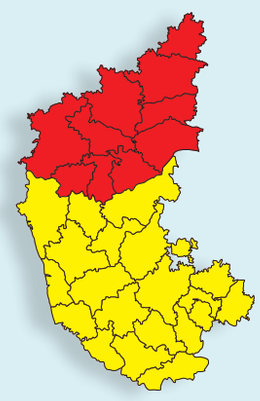
28 Total seats

1st Phase polling on 26 April

2nd Phase polling on 7 May

5 crore voters

58,834 polling stations



PREPARATIONS FOR SMOOTH POLLS

- 10.5 lakh polling stations manned by 1.5 crore personnel
- 55 lakh EVMs to be used
- 2,100 observers deployed
- Wheelchairs, ramps for the disabled at booths
- EC to have 'Myth vs Reality' segment on website to identify fake news
- Drone-based checking at borders during polls
- No use of children in poll campaign
- EC asks parties to refrain from hate speeches
- People living in camps in violence-hit Manipur will be allowed to vote from there
- Voters above 85 years and specially-abled can vote from home

WHAT HAPPENED IN 2019?

- BJP managed to corner 37.36 per cent of the votes, achieving the highest vote share by any party in India since the 1989 general election
- BJP alone won 303 seats, with the tally going up to 353 seats for NDA
- Congress secured 52 seats, UPA 98

THE BATTLE FOR STATE

Sikkim: Voting on 19 Apr
Total seats: 32
2019 Result: SKM (19), SDM (13) SDF (15)

Andhra Pradesh: Voting on 13 May
Total seats: 175
2019 Result: YSRCP (112), TDP(9), Others(1)

Arunachal Pradesh: Voting on 19 April
Total seats: 60
2019 Result: BJP (41), Cong(4), Others(15)

Odisha: Voting in 4 Phases 13, 20, 25 May, and 1 June.
Total seats: 146
2019 Result: BJD (112), BJP (23), Others(11)

Petrol, diesel price cut by up to ₹15.3 in Lakshadweep

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Petrol and Diesel prices have been slashed by up to Rs 15.3 per litre in the islands of Lakshadweep after Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) removed a cost element that was imposed to recover expenditure on special infrastructure to transport fuel to the remote islands. Petrol and diesel prices have been reduced by Rs 15.3 per litre in Androtт and Kalpeni islands and Rs 5.2 a litre for Kavaratti and Minicoy in Lakshadweep islands, the Oil Ministry said on X. *—PTI*

Cong vows to raise 50% quota cap, caste census

DK Shivakumar, Mallikarjun Kharge and Siddaramaiah address a press conference at party office, in Bengaluru **PHOTO: PTI**

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Saturday promised to pass a constitutional amendment to raise the 50 per cent cap on reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs, and a comprehensive social, economic and caste census.

He also assured a comprehensive review of the "anti-worker" labour codes passed by the Narendra Modi government, and to make suitable amendments to strengthen the rights of labour.

The promises are part of another five guarantees, each for 'Shramik Nyay' and 'Hissedari Nyay' announced by Congress on Saturday. Congress guarantees to resolve all pending Forest Rights Act claims within one year and initiate a transparent process to review rejected claims within 6 months, Kharge said. These promises were announced as part of the "Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra," led by Rahul Gandhi, where a total of 15 guarantees have been announced under "Kisan Nyay," "Yuva Nyay," and "Mahila Nyay." Kharge further said a seven phase election for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls meant that "Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to tour everywhere," he said . Kharge is of the opinion that polls should have rather been completed in three or four phases.

"We are not anxious about what is going to happen, but Modiji putting seven phases, it means that he wants to tour everywhere. I have also contested nearly 12 elections and there hardly used to be four phases. Sometimes it used to be even one phase. I have seen two phases also but maximum it used to be four," he said. *—Salar News with Agencies*

PM KICKS OFF BJP'S CAMPAIGN FROM KALABURAGI

KALABURAGI, 16 MARCH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday launched a scathing attack on the Congress government in Karnataka alleging deterioration of law and order situation and accused it of indulging in "loot" when the people are in trouble.

Formally launching the party's Lok Sabha election campaign here in the home turf of Congress President M Mallikarujn Kharge, he also claimed that the people of Karnataka have decided to make BJP victorious in the state in the upcoming polls.

"The anger that you (people) have towards Congress in Karnataka I can understand. The Congress is a party that despite changing their costume a number of times, their misdeeds don't change. That's the reason people of Karnataka are awake and are angry towards it," Modi said.

According to political analysts, Karnataka is very important for the BJP in south India as it's only here that it had held power in the past. The BJP bagged 25 seats out of the total 28 in the State in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. An independent backed by the party had also won.

Addressing a mega public rally here, Modi said people of Karnataka are disenchanted with the Congress government in Karnataka within such a short span of time. "This shows that people are aware of Congress' truth. Congress is not ready to improve despite getting several chances." To meet the "expenses of the party and the family, earnings of the people of the state are being supplied", he said. *—PTI*

WATERY TOUGH TIMES

Migrant workers carry pots of water during railway track cleaning work near Jnanabharathi station, Kengeri, amid crisis in Bengaluru, on Saturday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Owaisi moves SC seeking stay on CAA

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi has moved Supreme Court seeking a stay on the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Rules till the apex court disposes of the petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019.

The Centre had on 11 March paved the way for the implementation of CAA with the notification of the relevant rules, four years after the contentious law was passed by Parliament to fast-track Indian citizenship for undocumented non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who came to India before 31 December, 2014.

He has also sought a direction that "no applications seeking grant of citizenship status be entertained or processed by the respondents herein under section 6B of the Citizenship Act, 1955 (as it stands amended by the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019) during the pendency of the proceedings". The application says it is a well-settled law that the apex court has the power to grant a stay of a statutory provision as well as stay the rules issued under the said statute and hold its operationalisation in abeyance while adjudicating the constitutional vires of the provision or the enactment. *—PTI*

ACCIDENT OR LEAK?

Covid likely originated from lab than animals: Study

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Being more than 50 per cent, the researchers concluded a higher probability of Covid-19 originating unnaturally **PHOTO: PTI**

According to new research Covid-19 pandemic in more probability had an unnatural origin than a natural one with a potential source being a lab accident or leak. Originally designed to distinguish between natural epidemics and deliberate biological attacks, researchers modified the Grunow-Finke Tool (mGFT) by tweaking the criteria to determine the likelihood of the nature of the pandemic's origin.

The mGFT tool, contains 11 criteria such as intensity and dynamics of the pandemic, including its rapid and unusual geographic spread, an unusual strain of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and peculiarities in clinical symptoms experienced.

The researchers at the University of New South Wales, Australia, assigned points from one to three to each criterion based on available evidence collected from literature and case data from the public source 'Our World in Data' that gathers information from the WHO, John Hopkins University and official government reports.

Factors such as biological risk of bat virus research at Wuhan Institute of Virology, unusual strain, pandemic intensity and dynamics were assigned points of three, three, and two, respectively, while clinical symptoms was assigned two points.

- The researchers said the modified GFT provides a risk analysis framework that can be applied to differentiate between natural and unnatural epidemics and the tool should be included in the toolset for investigating the pandemic's origins.

Each criterion was multiplied by a weighting factor (1-3) to compute a score. A final score of more than 50 per cent favoured unnatural origins, while less favoured natural origins.

The final score that the mGFT algorithm calculated produced a total of 41 out of 60 points. Being more than 50 per cent, the researchers concluded a higher probability of Covid-19 originating unnaturally, with a focus on lab accidents or leaks as potential sources.

The researchers said the modified GFT provides a risk analysis framework that can be applied to differentiate between natural and unnatural epidemics and the tool should be included in the toolset for investigating the pandemic's origins.

"The debate about the origins of SARS-COV-2 has been focused largely on medical evidence but not on other intelligence, which is key to identifying unnatural epidemics," the researchers wrote. *—PTI*

Draft notification on private schools out

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

The land acquired for starting private schools in Karnataka must be exclusively designated for educational purposes and not for anything else, as per a draft notification of Karnataka Educational Institutions (No Objection Certificate and Regulation) Amendment Rules 2024, released by Department of School Education. Furthermore, only schools registered under Karnataka Right to Education Act will be eligible to receive a no-objection letter from the government.In a move aimed at streamlining the application process, the draft rules stipulate that the fee of Rs 2 lakh submitted along with the application for the No Objection Certificate, will be deemed non-refundable, even in cases of rejection due to document unavailability or other reasons. However, this fee will be credited towards subsequent applications, provided the application is rejected in the first three attempts. On the fourth attempt, a fresh fee of Rs 2 lakh will be required. The revised regulations will to come into effect on 21 March. —*Salar News*

PHOTO: X

Navy sailor from Kolar dies in Nilgai attack in Jamnagar

KOLAR, 16 MARCH

A 22-year-old Indian Navy sailor from Kolar died after being attacked by Nilgai animal at a training camp at Jamnagar in Gujarat. Harshith Prasanna of Gulpet has been posted at Jamnagar for one year. On the evening of 12 March, Prasanna was speaking to his father over mobile phone when he spotted a few Nilgai calves grazing on nearby lands and there were some plastic papers in the vicinity. To prevent calves from eating the plastic, Prasanna told his parents that he would go and chase them away. As he was chasing the calves away, a huge Nilgai pounced on him and stabbed him with antlers. Though he was taken to the hospital, he succumbed to his injuries, his father Prasanna said. —*Salar News*

PHOTO: X

Gangubai Trust brought under music varsity

MYSURU, 16 MARCH

State government has brought Dr GangubaiHanagal Gurukul Trust in Hubballi, which gives training in Hindustani classical music, under the ambit of Karnataka State Dr Gangubai Hangal Music and Performing Arts University in Mysuru. With only 21 students currently enrolled in Hindustani Sangeet Kendra under the trust, the annual operational cost stands at Rs 2.13 crore. The trust was integrated with the university to reduce the financial strain on the government, optimise resources and enhance efficiency in governance.Department of Higher Education issued an order for the integration on 28 February. All administrative, educational and financial functions of the trust will now fall under the purview of the Chancellor of the university. Proposals for recruiting personnel must get approval from the university.Furthermore, the directive emphasised prudence in staffing, with the continuation of sanctioned posts contingent upon necessity. Any additional positions or staff deemed surplus to requirements are to be promptly phased out. —*Salar News*

Cong & BJP brace for another poll battle

Congress to ride on popularity of guarantee schemes, while BJP looks to repeat last LS polls results

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

Congress and BJP are bracing for another mega electoral battle in less than a year in Karnataka as they lock horns in the high-stakes Lok Sabha elections.

Elections will be held in two phases on 26 April and 7 May.

Karnataka is the most important State for the BJP in south India as it's only here that it had held power in the past. Congress won a mere one seat out of the total 28 in the State in the 2019 General Elections.

Having scored a thumping victory in the Assembly elections, which witnessed a triangular fight between Congress, BJP and JD(S) in May last year, the ruling party is determined to put up a strong show and has set an ambitious target for winning 15 to 20 seats in the Lok Sabha elections.

BJP swept the previous Lok Sabha elections bagging 25 seats, while an independent backed by it also won. JD(S), headed by former prime minister HD Deve Gowda, emerged victorious in one constituency. Congress and JD(S) were running a coalition government back then and had fought the election together.

JD(S) put up a poor show in the Assembly elections winning just 19 seats in the 224-member Assembly, while Congress bagged 135 and the then ruling BJP 66 seats. The regional outfit joined the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in September last year and is fighting the Lok Sabha elections in alliance with BJP.

Elections will be held in two phases on 26 April and 7 May in Karnataka. ***PHOTO: PTI***

"We are 100 per cent confident that we will win a minimum of 25 seats," former chief minister and member of BJP's Parliamentary Board, BS Yediyurappa said. "We are putting in all our efforts."

The coming polls are also seen as a "litmus test" for his son BY Vijayendra, who was appointed President of the party's State unit in November last year. Ensuring a BJP sweep is key to consolidating his position and silencing critics who have questioned his selection for the post. Even as the ruling Congress and BJP are yet to come out with their full list of candidates for the polls in the State, there is a fair idea about the campaign issues in their armoury. The recent bomb blast at a popular eatery here and the raising of "pro-Pakistan" slogans in the corridors of 'Vidhana Soudha' have given fresh ammunition to BJP to attack the Congress government.

Congress would seek to ride on the popularity of its "guarantee schemes" and make BJP-led NDA government's "step-motherly" attitude towards the State a major poll plank, party sources said.

Congress on 8 March released its first list of seven candidates, while BJP came out with 20 nominees on Wednesday.

Congress sources said the government's guarantees – 'Shakti', Gruha Lakshmi', Gruha Jyoti', Yuva Nidhi' and Anna Bhagya' -- have caught the imagination of the people and party would harp on them in the run-up to the elections. The party has been alleging that the Central government has been indifferent towards Karnataka in giving the State its due share in funds and has not provided the assistance it had requested to tackle drought in many parts of the State.

"We gave the first memorandum to the Centre on 20 October, 2023 to release Rs 18,172 crore for drought mitigation but till now the Centre did not give even a penny," Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said.

Siddaramaiah, Ministers, Congress MLAs and MPs on 7 February staged a demonstration in Delhi against the "injustice" to the State in releasing funds and giving its share of Central grants. The party is also expected to highlight in a big way the remarks made by BJP MP Anantkumar Hegde on amending the Constitution. "Let this General Election revolve around this issue,", Siddaramaiah said.

BJP President JP Nadda set the tone for the party's campaign while addressing booth-level party workers at Chikkodi in Belagavi district earlier this month.

He accused the Congress government of being soft on terrorists as he referred to the chanting of 'Pakistan zindabad' slogans during the victory celebrations of Congress candidate Syed Naseer Hussain in Rajya Sabha elections here on 27 February, and the 1 March low-intensity bomb blast at 'The Rameshwaram Cafe'. —*PTI*

We will win 20 seats: Shivakumar

MYSURU, 16 MARCH

Congress is poised to win 20 seats in Lok Sabha elections in Karnataka, said Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar here on Saturday. -PTI

Stage set for pivotal moment in nation's journey: Siddaramaiah

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Saturday said that with Election Commission unveiling the schedule for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the stage is set for a pivotal moment in our nation's journey.

He said the Congress party recognises that this election is more than just a political contest; it's a pivotal moment for our democracy and for every Indian who seeks a future defined by prosperity, justice, and inclusivity.

"Today, our country faces significant challenges the pain of price rises, the shadow of unemployment, and the distress of our farmers weigh heavily on the heart of our nation. These are not just issues; they are the lived realities of millions, creating a sense of frustration and a longing for change," he said in a post on social media platform X.

"We approach these elections with a spirit of optimism and a commitment to the values that have long defined our party: guaranteed inclusivity, progress, and social justice," he added.

"Our campaign is grounded in a vision for a guaranteed future where every citizen has the guarantee of opportunity to thrive, supported by policies that ensure equitable growth, environmental sustainability, and empowerment for all," the Chief Minister said.

He urged the public to cast their vote for Congress as it would mean supporting hope, change and progress. "As we embark on this electoral journey, we do so with a deep appreciation for the trust and support of the people. Our pledge is to uphold the principles of good governance, transparency, and accountability, drawing on our rich legacy of service to the nation," he added.

Meanwhile, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said an election is a celebration of democracy and that they were confident of winning this election as far as Karnataka was concerned. "It is a celebration of democracy.

We have to celebrate. We have to enjoy. We have to fight....All this is part of democracy. We are confident that we are going to win this election as far as Karnataka is concerned," he added. —*PTI*

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah ***PHOTO: X***

> **Our campaign is grounded in a vision for a guaranteed future where every citizen has the guarantee of opportunity to thrive, supported by policies that ensure equitable growth, environmental sustainability, and empowerment for all**
>
> -Siddaramaiah, Chief Minister

Siddaramaiah questions PM on electoral bonds

BENGALURU, 16 MAR

Terming electoral bonds as a "scam" and the "biggest corruption scandal in the world", Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Saturday questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi about BJP's alleged silence on the issue.

Questioning the PM, who was on a visit to the State on Saturday, Siddaramaiah wondered if the Union government was "misusing" its investigative agencies to extort donations and insisted that Supreme Court should establish a Special Investigation Committee to probe the electoral bond "scam", and, until then, freeze the bank accounts of BJP.

"Welcome to Karnataka, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Please answer why is BJP silent about the electoral bond scam - the biggest corruption scandal in the world?" Siddarmaiah posted on social media platform X.

"For a decade, you held power, promising to bring back black money from Swiss Bank, eliminate black money via demonetisation, claiming 'Na Khaunga, Na Khane Dunga', and being the so-called 'Chowkidar of the Nation'. Now, it is time for you to address the issues surrounding the electoral bond scam," he said.

"Despite the Supreme Court's order, why is the State Bank of India (SBI) hesitant to provide complete information? If the sale and purchase of electoral bonds was conducted legally, why is SBI concealing information? Who is exerting pressure on SBI," he asked, demanding Modi's response.

Modi on Saturday formally launched the party's Lok Sabha election campaign in the state in Kalaburagi, the home turf of Congress President M Mallikarjun Kharge.

He said the information released by Election Commission shows that the BJP government at the centre is "blackmailing" business men, Siddaramaiah said. -*PTI*

Don't speak against Yaduveer during polls: CM to party leaders

MYSURU, 16 MARCH

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has instructed Congress leaders to refrain from criticising Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar, the scion of the erstwhile Mysuru royal family, during hustings of Lok Sabha elections. Yaduveer is the BJP's candidate from Mysuru-Kodagu Lok Sabha constituency. "Do not speak against Yaduveer for any reason. The family holds significant emotional value to Mysuru and criticising Yaduveer could backfire on us," Siddaramaiah said in Mysuru on Friday. The Congress leader said it is important to maintain unity within the party and avoid actions that could jeopardise the electoral prospects not only in Mysuru but also in other constituencies. On Friday, Siddaramaiah consulted with party leaders to gauge their opinions to finalise the Congress candidate from the Mysuru-Kodagu and Chamarajanagar constituencies. Congress has the upper hand in Assembly constituencies under Mysore-Kodagu Lok Sabha constituency. Madikeri, Virajpet, Piriyapatna, Narasimharaja and Chamaraja are represented by Congress MLAs. Sources privy to the developments revealed that candidates for Mysuru and Chamarajanagar constituencies have been finalised during the meeting. M Laxman, a Vokkaliga leader and former MUDA president, is likely to be the candidate from Mysuru, while minister HC Mahadevappa's son Sunil Bose may contest from Chamarajanagar seat. —*Salar News*

GEARING UP FOR POLLS

AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge with Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and DCM DK Shivakumar during a press conference in Bengaluru on Saturday ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

'Centre not allocating funds for Kalaburagi'

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

AICC President Mallikarjun criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi for not allocating sufficient funds for development projects in Kalaburagi. "We welcome Modi on behalf of all Kalaburagi people for not doing anything," Kharge humorously said during the announcement of Congress guarantees ahead of Lok Sabha polls.

Kharge's remarks came after Prime Minister Modi launched BJP's Lok Sabha poll campaign from Kalaburagi, which is Kharge's home turf. Kharge said there is an apparent lack of development projects initiated by the Modi government in Karnataka, particularly in Kalaburagi. He mentioned the contrast between the initiatives undertaken during the Congress rule, such as the introduction of 27 trains in Kalaburagi within 11 months and the alleged neglect of the Kalaburagi railway division project and other crucial projects under the Modi government. -*Salar News*

Polls should have been over in 3 or 4 phases, says Mallikarjun

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Saturday said a seven-phase election for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls meant that "Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to tour everywhere".

Kharge said the polls should have rather been completed in three or four phases. "We are not anxious about what is going to happen, but Modiji putting seven phases, it means that he wants to tour everywhere. In this country, I have also contested nearly 12 elections and there hardly used to be four phases. Sometimes it used to be even one phase. I have seen two phases also but maximum it used to be four," he said here.

Kharge said conducting polls in seven phases meant that nearly all the development works will be stopped. "Stopping nearly 70-80 days, imagine how the country will progress? Because of the election code of conduct...materials will not be supplied. Budget will not be spent. So according to me this is not good. He could have completed within three or four phases," he said.

"So, it is easy for people also to get their businesses completed, infrastructure everything. It should have helped but anyways Modi is Modi," he added. —*PTI*

As water crisis deepens, RO plants run dry

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

With the water crisis in Bengaluru deepening, the queues outside reverse osmosis (RO) drinking water plants have become longer.

The depletion of groundwater and drying up of more than 3,000 borewells in the capital City of Karnataka has made it difficult for the people. Amid strict measures imposed by the government in the wake of the scarcity of water, many residents of the City are now dependent upon the RO water plant. "For the last few days, we have been facing problems getting water from the RO plant," said a resident of Bengaluru.

Another local complained of the untimely supply of water. "We get less water and we have to make 2-3 visits to check if water is available. Kaveri water is supplied only once or twice a week. Rains haven't started yet so there is no underground water, and even the Kaveri River has less water," said Shabbir, a resident.

Meanwhile, many IT professionals have resorted to working from home, as the City battles the ongoing water crisis. "If we get work from home it will be good as the water will be saved," said Amogh, an IT employee.

Another IT employee Varsha said, "More amount of water is spent if the employees go to the offices." -*ANI*

CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

MTR gets Guinness Record for longest dosa

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

Celebrating its 100-year journey, MTR Foods announced that they are now the new Guinness World Records title holder for the Longest Dosa in partnership with Lorman Kitchen Equipment.

MTR's signature Red Rice batter was used to prepare this monumental dosa at its Bommasandra factory, a statement said. The record was created by a team of 75 chefs, comprising both seasoned experts and budding culinary talent, under the guidance of MTR's Cuisine Centre of Excellence.

The record was created by a team of 75 chefs, comprising both seasoned experts and budding culinary talents ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

Sunay Bhasin, CEO of MTR, said, "This is a moment of immense pride for us. We were attempting for a 100-feet dosa, however, we have outdone ourselves and have created a 123-feet dosa. This monumental dosa is a celebration of our heritage and the love we have been receiving for generations.

"Dosa has been a part of MTR's legacy from the very beginning and it continues to be one of the most loved products of MTR even today. From being a humble South Indian dish, it is now recognised and loved worldwide. The longest dosa world record is a celebration of our bond with our consumers and their favourite dish," Bhasin said.

Chandra Mouli, MD, Lorman Kitchen Equipment Pvt. Ltd, said: "World's longest Dosa was cooked on a specially built induction stove, the biggest ever from Lorman. Induction cooking equipment is highly efficient, sustainable, and eco-friendly, creating a safer ecosystem for chefs."

This culinary treat was shared not only with MTR's employees but also with children from local schools and members of the surrounding communities. With this, MTR broke the previous world record title of longest dosa of 16.68 m (54 ft 8.69 in), the statement added. —*Salar News*

2 arrested for killing Uzbek woman in hotel

BENGALURU, 16 MARCH

Seshadripuram police have arrested two housekeeping staff members of a hotel in the City on charges of murdering a 27-year-old woman from Uzbekistan on 13 March for money.

Zarina Djeparova was in Bengaluru on a 10-day holiday. She checked into Jagadish Hotel in the City on 5 March. Djeparova was found dead in her hotel room on Wednesday night by hotel staff who opened the room with a master key after she failed to open the door, police said. She was found to have been smothered to death.

Police found that two members of the housekeeping staff at the hotel had disappeared on the evening of 13 March. CCTV footage at the hotel also linked the suspects to the murder.

Police tracked the accused Amruth and Robert, both natives of Assam, to Kerala where they had fled. They killed the Uzbek national to get her money and phone. The police have recovered Rs 13,000 and some Uzbekistan currency Som as well as the mobile phone of the victim from the accused.

According to a police complaint filed by Gaurav Singh, the hotel manager, the woman from Uzbekistan was brought to the hotel by the broker Rahul Kumar on 5 March and had been given room number 219 on second floor for her stay until 16 March. -*Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

SC to hear plea of 6 disqualified HP MLAs on 18 March

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on 18 March a plea filed by six Congress rebels, who had cross-voted in the recent Rajya Sabha polls in Himachal Pradesh, against their disqualification from the state assembly. The six rebels -- Sudhir Sharma, Ravi Thakur, Rajinder Rana, Inder Dutt Lakhanpal, Chetanya Sharma and Devinder Kumar Bhutto -- were disqualified for defying a Congress whip to be present in the House and vote in favour of the Himachal Pradesh government during the cut motion and budget. When the plea was heard by the top court on 12 March, the bench asked the petitioners as to why they have not moved the high court challenging their disqualification. The counsel had said it was a rare case where the Speaker disqualified these MLAs within 18 hours. *—PTI*

Bihar CM Nitish Kumar retains home, administration dept

PATNA, 16 MARCH

A day after the expansion of his cabinet, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Saturday allocated portfolios to ministers of NDA government. While Kumar retained the Home and General Administration departments, Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Chaudhary has been given Finance and Commercial department portfolios. Another Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sinha, who is also from BJP, has been given the Road Construction, Mines and Geology and Art, Culture & Youth departments, a notification issued by the Cabinet Secretariat department said on Saturday. While BJP's Prem Kumar has been allocated Cooperative and Environment, Forest and Climate Change departments. Nitish's trusted lieutenant Bijendra Prasad Yadav has been allocated Energy and Planning & Development departments. Senior JD (U) leader Vijay Kumar Chaudhary has been given charge of the Water Resources and Parliamentary Affairs departments. *—PTI*

RSS report claims farmers' stir only to spread anarchy

NAGPUR, 16 MARCH

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has alleged that ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, attempts "to spread anarchy under the pretext of farmers' agitation have been restarted", and said "separatist terrorism" has raised its "ugly head" through it in Punjab. It also said the "atrocities committed against hundreds of mothers and sisters" at Sandeshkhali in West Bengal has shaken the conscience of the entire society.The Sangh also raised concerns over the ethnic conflict in Manipur, saying it created "mistrust" between the two sections of the society-Meitei and Kuki that caused "deep wounds". *—PTI*

Rahul ends Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra by reading Preamble

MUMBAI, 16 MARCH

Congress leader Gandhi concluded his 63-day-old Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra here by paying tributes to Dr B R Ambedkar at his memorial Chaityabhoomi in central Mumbai and reading the Preamble of the Constitution. The former Congress president was accompanied by his sister and party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. He paid tributes to Dr Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, and read its preamble. The yatra, which commenced from strife-torn Manipur on January 14, entered Mumbai from neighbouring Thane on the 63rd day on Saturday. Gandhi will undertake a 'Nyay Sankalp Padyatra' from Mani Bhavan to August Kranti Maidan in Mumbai on Sunday morning. *—PTI*

LS POLLS 2024: MODEL CODE COMES INTO FORCE

Election Commission urges parties to maintain decorum

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

The Model Code of Conduct came into force on Saturday with the announcement of Lok Sabha polls by Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, who requested political parties to maintain decorum during campaigning.

Polling for the 543 Lok Sabha seats will be held in seven phases, starting with 102 in the first phase on 19 April.

"I urge parties to refrain from personal attacks and foul language. No-go areas in speeches are defined to maintain civility. Let us not cross lines in our rivalry. We have issued an advisory for the political parties, they are encouraged to foster a political discourse that inspires rather than divides," he said. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kumar also advised the political parties against hate speeches, caste or religious appeals, criticism of any aspect of private life, masquerading of advertisements as news and social media posts vilifying or insulting rivals.

MCC is a set of conventions agreed upon by all stakeholders and imposed during elections. Its objective is to keep the campaigning, polling and counting process orderly, clean and peaceful and check any abuse of state machinery and finances by the party in power.

According to Election Commission of India, MCC states that the party in power at the Centre and in the states should ensure that it does not use its official position for campaigning. Ministers and other government authorities cannot announce financial grants in any form. No project or scheme that may have the effect of influencing the voter in favour of the party in power can be announced, and ministers cannot use official machinery for campaign purposes.

The issue of advertisement at the cost of the public exchequer in newspapers and other media is also considered an offence. The ruling dispensation also cannot make any ad-hoc appointments in government, public sector undertakings, etc that may influence the voters. *—PTI*

Polling for the 543 Lok Sabha seats will be held in seven phases, starting with 102 in the first phase on 19 April *PHOTO: PTI*

Biggest festival of democracy is here! EC has announced the 2024 Lok Sabha election dates. We, the BJP-NDA, are fully prepared for elections. #PhirEkBaarModiSarkar'

-Narendra Modi, Prime Minister

26 bypolls to be held along with LS elections

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

By-elections to 26 assembly seats across 13 states, including six constituencies in Himachal Pradesh where Congress MLAs were disqualified for rebellion, will be held along with the Lok Sabha elections beginning 19 April.

"There are 26 assembly constituencies where by-elections are due. These are in Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Telangana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu," Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar said at a press conference. Six assembly seats in Himachal Pradesh Dharamshala, Lahaul and Spiti, Sujanpur, Barsar, Gagret and Kutlehar will go to polls on 1 June along with the Lok Sabha elections.

Congress MLAs Sudhir Sharma, Ravi Thakur, Rajinder Rana, Inder Dutt Lakhanpal, Chaitanya Sharma and Devinder Kumar were disqualified for disobeying the party whip to be present in the assembly and vote in favour of the government during the discussion on the state budget.

In Gujarat, elections to five assembly constituencies, where the incumbent MLAs quit their seats to join the BJP, will be held on 7 May. *—PTI*

SIMULTANEOUS POLLS NOT POSSIBLE IN J&K DUE TO SECURITY REASONS: CEC

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar on Saturday said that the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly polls will be held after the Lok Sabha elections. "We (ECI) went to Jammu and Kashmir and were asked by all the political parties there to hold the state assembly elections with the Lok Sabha polls. After that, we held administrative meetings wherein it was discussed that a lot of security forces would be required to conduct state assembly election with Lok Sabha election in J-K," Kumar said. "All political parties asked ECI to conduct an Assembly election with Lok Sabha polls, but security agencies advised us that it would not be possible to provide security," he added. *—PTI*

WHO WILL WIN IN 2024?

SWOT analysis of 2 biggest national parties

STRENGTHS

- Ayodhya Ram temple strengthens party's Hindutva plank
- BJP relies on Narendra Modi's mass appeal
- Strong organisational machinery and dominant electoral agenda. Will bank on welfare schemes
- Congress has assured justice for oppressed, Dalits, youth and women.
- Congress promises MSP for farmers, caste census in nation
- Congress has presence in every state

WEAKNESSES

- BJP has swapped experienced state leaders having popular appeal with younger leaders
- Unemployment, price rise, communal disharmony will affect the party
- Multiple leaders quit party recently
- Poor organisational structure
- Lacks the quality of leadership it once offered

OPPORTUNITIES

- BJP's alliance with TDP, AIADMK will help the party win seats in South
- BJP's poll battle this year is far better than 2014, 2019
- 'Ladli Behna' scheme for women seen as a game-changer for BJP
- Congress will aim to consolidate the anti-BJP votes
- Unity among Oppn parties in INDIA bloc
- The party can raise the issue of rising prices of essential commodities like milk, gas, etc

THREATS

- Farmers' stir and wrestler issue will likely cause a dent in BJP's vote share
- Corruption charges against BJP after SC strikes down electoral bond
- It will be for the first time that BJP will face a direct contest on all 7 LS seats in New Delhi
- Modi's mass connect and growing domestic profile may hit Congress hard
- Simmering internal rumblings
- Congress has to also contend with opposition parties competing with each other

AP: YSRCP releases candidates list for 25 LS seats

AMARAVATI, 16 MARCH

YS Jagan Mohan Reddy-led YSRCP on Saturday announced the list of candidates for all the 25 Lok Sabha constituencies and 175 Assembly segments in Andhra Pradesh, allotting 50 per cent of the seats to SC, ST, BC and minority communities.

The ruling YSRCP announced the list of candidates at the 'samadhi' (grave) of former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Rajasekhar Reddy in the presence of party supremo and CM Jagan Mohan Reddy and senior leaders at Idupulupaya in Kadapa district.

Bapatla MP Nandigam Suresh read out the names of the candidates for the Lok Sabha elections while Revenue Minister D Prasada Rao did so for the Assembly polls.

Of the candidates for 175 Assembly seats, he said 29 were from the SC community, seven (ST), 48 (BC), 91 (OC), along with 19 women candidates. The list of candidates for the Lok Sabha polls comprised four from the SC community, one (ST), 11 (BC) and nine (OC). Five of the contestants for the Parliamentary elections were women.

In comparison to 2019, YSRCP has allocated seven more Assembly seats to candidates from SC, ST, BC and minority communities and four more MP seats to the same bracket.

As per the list, B Jhansi Laxmi will contest from the Visakhapatnam Lok Sabha constituency while G Uma Bala is the candidate in Narasapuram and V Vijayasai Reddy will try his luck from Nellore.

Also, 17 doctors, 15 lawyers, 34 engineers, five teachers, two former bureaucrats, one defence personnel and a journalist were part of the candidate's list. *—PTI*

Jagan Mohan Reddy *PHOTO: PTI*

LIQUOR POLICY SCAM

Court sends K Kavitha to ED custody till 23 Mar

BRS leader K Kavitha being taken to the Enforcement Directorate after she was produced before Rouse Avenue Court *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

A Delhi court on Saturday sent BRS leader K Kavitha to ED custody till 23 March in a money laundering case linked to the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy.

Special Judge for ED cases MK Nagpal passed the order on an application of the federal anti-money laundering agency seeking her remand.

The agency produced Kavitha, daughter of former Telangana chief minister K Chandrashekar Rao, before the special court, and sought her custody for 10 days. However, the court remanded her in ED custody only till 23 March. While being produced before the court, Kavitha termed her arrest as illegal and said, "We will fight it (case) out in court."

The counsel also accused the federal anti-money laundering agency of flouting the Supreme Court direction while arresting her. They claimed the apex court had directed the ED to not take any coercive action against Kavitha before it hears her plea against the summons issued by the agency to her on March 19.

Meanwhile, BRS leaders on Thursday staged protests in several parts of Telangana over the arrest of K Kavitha. The leaders held a protest at Siddhipet's old bus stand. However, police detained the protestors. BRS leaders were heard chanting the slogan "ED Modi ek hai

Local BRS MLAs Rajashekar Reddy and Laxma Reddy held a protest in Hyderabad at Uppal Radhika X Roads and Malkajgiri X Roads with their followers.

The agency also accused Kavitha of destroying evidence in the case. "We have summoned several witnesses to confront K Kavitha with," the agency told the court. *—PTI*

Court grants bail to Kejriwal in ED complaint case

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was on Saturday granted bail by the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (ACMM) of Rouse Avenue Court against arrest for skipping summons issued to him by Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the Delhi liquor policy money laundering case.

During the hearing, Kejriwal appeared physically before the court.

ACMM Divya Malhotra granted bail to Kejriwal and noted that the Section 174 of the Indian Penal Code is bailable and directed to furnish Rs 15,000 thousand each in both complaint cases.

Kejriwal while challenging the summons in sessions court further submitted that there was no intentional disobedience on his part. Kejriwal moved the Sessions Court challenging summons issued to him by Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate on ED complaints for not complying with the summons. The excise policy was aimed at revitalising the city's flagging liquor business and replacing a sales-volume-based regime with a licence fee for traders. *—ANI*

Cong treats Muslims like slaves: Assam MP after quitting party

GUWAHATI, 16 MARCH

Congress MP Abdul Khaleque from Assam, who quit the party on Saturday accused his former party of treating Muslims as 'slaves' and attributed his resignation to personal vendetta by a senior AICC leader.

Expressing disappointment over not being nominated for the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, Khaleque claimed that several parties, including Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), TMC and AAP, were in touch with him, but refrained from confirming whether he would be joining any other party at the moment.

In the resignation letter, he claimed that the party has taken a "strange route" in the state, and "the attitude and approach taken by the party's state president and AICC general secretary in charge have ruined the prospects of the party in Assam". *—PTI*

Noted Bollywood singer Anuradha Paudwal joins BJP

New Delhi, 16 March

Noted Bollywood singer Anuradha Paudwal, who is also known for singing devotional songs, joined BJP on Saturday ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Paudwal praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi and said she was happy to join the party led by him. —PTI

BJP MP Ajay resigns over LS poll nominees

Bhopal, 16 March

Bharatiya Janata Party's Rajya Sabha member from Madhya Pradesh, Ajay Pratap Singh, on Saturday resigned from the party's primary membership, expressing displeasure over its process of selecting candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, and slammed it for indulging in "large-scale corruption". He claimed that corrupt people are getting protection in BJP. —PTI

CBI arrests Sheikh Shahjahan's brother, 2 others

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

CBI on Saturday arrested three people, including the brother of suspended TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh, for being allegedly involved in the 5 January attack on an Enforcement Directorate team at Sandeshkhali in West Bengal, officials said.

Sheikh Alomgir, who is Sheikh's brother, Mafujar Molla, the president of the TMC's student wing in Sandeshkhali, and Sirajul Molla, a local, would be produced before a local court on Sunday.

Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) took over three FIRs registered by the West Bengal Police on the directions of the Calcutta High Court.

After detailed examination, and according to technical evidence collected, they were arrested by the CBI today, the officials said. *—PTI*

MANIPUR LS POLLS

Ethnic violence, illegal immigration key issues

IMPHAL, 16 MARCH

The ethnic violence between Meitei and Kuki communities since May last year claiming more than 200 lives in Manipur has grabbed the headlines across the country and, naturally became the core issue in the Lok Sabha elections.

This strife has also given birth to several other issues which will be widely debated during campaigning in the two Lok Sabha seats in the northeastern state Inner Manipur and Outer Manipur.

Illegal Immigration from Myanmar which the BJP claims is the root cause of the violence, displacement of people because of the strife, and Suspension of Operations agreement with Kuki militants are among the other major issues. The elections will be held in the state in two phases on 19 and 26 April.

Manipur has remained gripped by recurring bouts of violence since ethnic clashes between the two . The clashes have occurred over a number of grievances that both sides have against the other.

However, the flashpoint of the crisis has been a move to give Meiteis Scheduled Tribe status.

Illegal immigration

Illegal immigration from Myanmar has been cited as the root cause of ethnic violence by the government. To address the issue, the Centre has announced erecting border fencing and cancellation of the Free Movement Regime.

Internally displaced people

The ethnic violence has left more than 60,000 people homeless who are languishing either in relief camps or hurriedly built pre-fabricated housest.

The Naga factor

The Naga community people, who form the highest number of voters in Outer Manipur, have not been a party to the ongoing violence. Nagas share a common history with Meiteis and, at the same time, members of the Scheduled Tribe community and Christians like the Kukis. *—PTI*

Members of Assam Christian Forum and CRI-NEI organise a 'Solidarity Prayer' for in Guwahati on Saturday *PHOTO: ANI*

BJP releases 'Mai Modi ka parivar hun' song

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

- The song 'Main Modi Ka Parivar hun' described how India's situation has become better after Modi became Prime Minister

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday released a campaign song titled, 'Mai Modi ka parivar hun', showcasing his commitment to all.

The campaign song 'Main Modi Ka Parivar hu' described how India's situation has become better after Modi became Prime Minister. The three minutes, 13-second-long video portrays PM with beneficiaries of government schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojna, Direct Benefit Transfer, Har Ghar Nal Scheme, and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana among others. The song was released hours ahead of the announcement of the dates of the Lok Sabha elections by Election Commission. On 4 March, BJP leaders, including Union Home Minister Amit Shah, and BJP President JP Nadda, added "Modi ka Parivar" slogan to their handles on X.Following Modi's "Chowkidar" slogan, leaders, as well as members of the general public, had appended "Main Bhi Chowkidar" to their names. *—ANI*

PHOTO: X

Navneet Sehgal is new Chairman of Prasar Bharati

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Retired bureaucrat Navneet Kumar Sehgal has been appointed as the new Prasar Bharati chairman, a post that had been vacant for four years. Sehgal succeeds A Surya Prakash, whose term ended in February 2020 after he turned 70, the upper age limit for a person holding the post.Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Friday chaired a meeting to select the chairman of the country's public broadcaster. The vice president, who is also the chairman of the Rajya Sabha, heads the selection panel for the post of the Prasar Bharati chairman. The chairperson of the Press Council of India and a nominee of the President complete the three-member panel. *—PTI*

Railway staffer, son murdered, minor's body found in fridge

BHOPAL, 16 MARCH

A railway employee and his eight-year-old son were allegedly murdered at their residence in Jabalpur city of Madhya Pradesh, and the body of the boy was found stuffed in a refrigerator, police said on Saturday. The minor daughter of the deceased railway staffer went missing following the incident that occurred on Friday at the Millenium Colony located under the Civil Line police station, with the police suspecting that she eloped with their neighbour after the latter murdered the father-son duo. The deceased, Rajkumar Vishwakarma, lived with his two minor children following the death of his wife, Superintendent of Police (SP) Aditya Pratap Singh said." *—PTI*

JNUSU elections: HC appoints former SC judge as observer

NEW DELHI, 19 MARCH

The Delhi High Court has appointed former Supreme Court judge V Ramasubramanian as an 'observer' to exercise oversight over the activities of the election committee constituted for the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union elections for the 2023-24 academic year. Dealing with a petition filed by a student, Justice Sachin Datta also asked the grievance redressal cell set up in terms of the Lyngdoh Committee recommendations to examine and pass an order on grievances concerning the constitution of the election committee before the declaration of the final result. The JNUSU elections are scheduled to be held on 22 March and results will be declared on 24 March. The petitioner alleged that the procedure adopted for electing the members of the election committee was in complete contravention of the rules.*—ANI*

Kolkata college girls launch sit-in protest for bus services

KOLKATA, 16 MARCH

A section of female students of Presidency University here are staging a sit-in demonstration and gherao of some institute officials on the campus for over 48 hours, demanding introduction of bus service between girls' hostel and the varsity campus. The female students are demanding the reintroduction of bus service for boarders, which had been provided till 2019 but was discontinued after pandemic. High drama was marked on Friday evening as the development officer of the hostel, complained of physical discomfiture and was rushed to hospital. He was allowed to leave for homebut the dean was under SFI president said. They demanded keeping the transportation fee within Rs 500.*—PTI*

Govt bans J&K parties over terror involvement

Ban on Yasin Malik's party gets extended by five years

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

The Union Home Minister said the Modi government has extended the ban on the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front for a further period of five years *PHOTO: PTI*

The Central government on Saturday banned the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Freedom League and all factions of the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples League associated with the separatist conglomerate Hurriyat Conference under strict anti-terror laws.

Additionally, the ban on the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which is led by imprisoned terror accused Yasin Malik, has been extended by another five years.

The announcement came just hours before the schedule for the general elections was to be declared.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the Modi government will remain unsparing to people and organisations involved in terror activities.

Shah also said that pursuing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's policy of zero-tolerance towards terrorism, the Union home ministry has declared four factions of the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples League "unlawful associations". There are the JKPL (Mukhtar Ahmed Waza), the JKPL (Bashir Ahmad Tota), the JKPL (Ghulam Mohammad Khan) and the Yaqoob Sheikh-led JKPL (Aziz Sheikh).

These organisations were involved in inciting terror and abetting secessionism in Jammu and Kashmir and the government is committed to suppressing terrorism ruthlessly, he said.

The Union home minister said the Modi government has extended the ban on the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front for a further period of five years.

In a notification, the Union home ministry said the JKPFL, chaired by Mohammad Farooq Shah, was indulging in unlawful activities prejudicial to the integrity, sovereignty and security of the country.

Members of the JKPFL have remained involved in supporting terrorist activities and anti-India propaganda to incite secessionism in Jammu and Kashmir, and its leaders and members have been involved in mobilising funds to perpetrate unlawful activities, including supporting secessionist, separatist and terrorist activities, in the Union territory, it said *—PTI*

'SIKHS, HINDUS HIT TOO'

India abstains on Pak's UN resolution on Islamophobia

UNITED NATIONS, 16 MARCH

India stressed that the adoption of the resolution should not establish a precedent that could result in numerous resolutions centered on phobias *PHOTO: PTI*

India abstained in the UN General Assembly on a draft resolution introduced by Pakistan and co-sponsored by China on Islamophobia, asserting that the prevalence of "religiophobia" against Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and other faiths facing violence and discrimination must also be acknowledged rather than singling out just one religion.

The 193-member General Assembly adopted the resolution Measures to combat Islamophobia', introduced by Pakistan on Friday, with 115 nations voting in favour, none against, and 44 abstentions, including India, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Ukraine, and the UK.

India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj voiced condemnation of all acts motivated by anti-Semitism, Christianophobia and Islamophobia but asserted that it is crucial to acknowledge that such phobias extend beyond Abrahamic religions.

India stressed that the adoption of the resolution should not establish a precedent that could result in numerous resolutions centered on phobias tied to specific religions, "potentially dividing the United Nations into religious camps."

India called on all member states to consider the broader scope of religious discrimination that persists globally.

The destruction of the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan by the Taliban in March 2001 led to global condemnation.

The General Assembly adopted a resolution in 2022 proclaiming 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia in the wake of the 2019 mass shootings in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand that had killed over 50 people.

The UN Chief also voiced concern over "supremacist ideologies and attacks" against Jews, minority Christian communities, and many others. "Hatred of one group fuels hatred of another. Hate normalises hate. Hate destroys the fabric of our societies," he said. *—PTI*

Navy foils pirates' attempt to hijack ships in Somalia

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Indian Navy has foiled attempts by a group of Somali pirates to hijack ships in the high seas off the east coast of Somalia as it intercepted their vessel, officials said on Saturday.

The armed pirates had sailed out on board a cargo ship named Ruen that was hijacked around three months ago, they said.

"The ex-MV Ruen, which had been hijacked by Somali pirates on 14 December, was reported to have sailed out as a pirate ship towards conducting acts of piracy on high seas," Navy said.

The Navy said the pirates opened fire on the Indian warship, which took appropriate actions in self-defence as per international law and to counter piracy and used minimal force to neutralise the pirates' threat to shipping and seafarers.

On Friday, the Navy said an Indian warship and a long-range maritime patrol aircraft extended assistance to a Bangladeshi-flagged cargo vessel after it was hijacked.

. The Navy has already enhanced the deployment of its frontline ships and surveillance aircraft for maritime security operations in view of the maritime environment in the critical sea lanes, including in the North and Central Arabian Sea.

There have been mounting global concerns over Houthi militants launching a series of attacks on cargo vessels in the Red Sea in the last few months. *—PTI*

A BALANCING ACT

A man practices slacklining at Fort Kochi beach, in Kochi, on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

CHHATTISGARH HIKES DA FOR WORKERS BY 4%

RAIPUR, 16 MARCH

In a welcome announcement ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Friday said there will be a 4 per cent increase in Dearness Allowance (DA) for government officials in the state.

Hailing 'Modi Ki Guarantee' (Modi's guarantee), the Chief Minister said the promise of procuring 21 quintals of paddy at Rs 3,100 per quintal has been fulfilled."Prime Minister guaranteed the formation of a five-member committee that will review the problems of contractual workers," he said. Chief Minister Sai during poll-campaign visited neighbourhoods. *—ANI*

J&K approves 10% quota for Paharis, other tribes

JAMMU, 16 MARCH

PHOTO: PTI

Jammu and Kashmir's administration has approved a 10 per cent reservation in favour of four newly added tribes, taking the overall reservation for Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Union Territory to 20 per cent.

The administration has also approved the addition of 15 new castes in Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the enhancement of reservation in favour of OBCs to eight per cent.In February, the Parliament passed two bills providing reservation to the OBCs in local bodies and the addition of four more communities -- Gadda Brahmin, Koli, Paddari Tribe and Pahari Ethnic group -- to the list of the STs in Jammu and Kashmir.The spokesman said the administrative council which met here under Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha approved the proposal to amend the Jammu and Kashmir reservation rules, 2005, in light of Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Act, 2023, Constitution (Jammu & Kashmir) Scheduled Castes Order (Amendment) Act, 2024, Constitution (Jammu & Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 2024 and recommendations of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Commission, 2020. *—PTI*

EAM to pay 5-day visit to S'pore, Philippines & Malaysia

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

The visit will focus on enhancing bilateral relations with the three countries *PHOTO: X*

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will pay a five-day visit to Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia beginning 23 March to boost bilateral ties and discuss regional issues of "mutual concern".

The visit will focus on enhancing bilateral relations with the three countries and will provide an opportunity for engagement on regional issues of mutual concern.

The overall situation in the strategic waters, including the South China Sea and Red Sea, is likely to figure in Jaishankar's talks with his counterparts in the three countries.

India and many other democratic countries have been pressing for peaceful settlement of the disputes and for adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea).

The defence and strategic ties between India and the Philippines have been on an upswing in the last few years.

In January 2022, India sealed a USD 375 million deal with the Philippines to supply three batteries for the missile. Jaishankar and his counterparts in the three countries may also exchange views on the current situation arising out of the Houthi militants targeting various cargo vessels in the Red Sea and other strategic waterways in the region. *—PTI*

HC denies bail to PESO official in licence scam

Nagpur, 16 March

The Nagpur bench of the Bombay High Court has rejected the anticipatory bail plea of Purushendra Kumar Dhir Singh, the chief controller of the Petroleum and Explosive Safety Organization (PESO), observing that he was prima facie involved in an alleged licence scam. Justice Urmila Joshi-Phalke of the High Court rejected his pre-arrest bail application on 13 March.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had initiated action in this case by registering a First Information Report (FIR) on 3 January under the Prevention of Corruption Act.The FIR named Ashok Kumar Dalela and Vivek Kumar, both deputy chief controllers of explosives at PESO, Priyadarshan Dinkar Deshpande, a private individual, and Devi Singh Kachhawaha, director of Super Shivshakti Chemical Pvt Ltd from Rajasthan, as the accused. *—PTI*

Ratna Bhandar case: HC adjourns hearing on PIL

CUTTACK, 16 MARCH

Orissa High Court has adjourned the hearing for another two weeks on a PIL seeking tabling of Justice Raghubir Das Commission of Enquiry report on the missing keys of Puri Jagannath Temple 'Ratna Bhandar' in the state Assembly.

A Division Bench headed by Chief Justice Chakradhari Sharan Singh on Friday adjourned the hearing as the state government sought two weeks more time to file an affidavit in response to the PIL, which was filed by a Puri-based resident in the year 2023.

Dilip Kumar Baral had approached the High Court seeking the court's intervention as the state government had "failed" in making the enquiry commission report public.

Justice Das submitted his report to Odisha government on 29 November, 2018, but the state government has not tabled the report on the floor of state Assembly.

The state government reportedly spent around Rs 23 lakh for the Commission of Enquiry, Baral mentioned in his petition stating that the people of the state are kept in the dark about the findings of the Commission of Enquiry report.

In its preliminary hearing, High Court in April last year had asked the state government to file its counter in an affidavit within two months about the current status of the enquiry report. *—PTI*

Ramadan prayers denied at Akhoondji mosque

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

- High Court had last month refused to permit entry of devotees to the place on the occasion of Shab-e-Barat

The Delhi High Court has refused to allow prayers at the recently demolished 'Akhoondji mosque' in Mehrauli during the ongoing holy month of Ramadan.

Justice Sachin Datta, while dismissing a plea by Muntazmia Committee Madarsa Behrul Ulum and Kabarstan, noted that the High Court had last month refused to permit entry of devotees to the place on the occasion of Shab-e-Barat, and there was no justification to take a different view in the present instance."The reasoning given in the aforesaid order squarely applies in the context of the present application as well. In the circumstances, there is no justification for this Court to take a different view.

It recorded in the order that the land in question is currently in the possession of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and it has already passed an order for maintenance of status quo while dealing with the issue of legality of the demolition. The petitioner had sought directions for allowing unhindered entry of devotees to the place where the mosque stood before the demolition during the month of Ramzan, beginning the sunset of 11 March till Eid-ul-Fitr prayers.*—PTI*

3 JAIL WARDERS SUSPENDED

Murder accused goes live from UP Jail

BAREILLY, 16 MARCH

Probe was ordered after video of a murder accused Asif lodged in Bareilly Central Jail hosting a live video surfaced *PHOTO: X*

- The probe was ordered after a purported video of a murder accused Asif lodged in Bareilly Central Jail hosting a live video surfaced on a social media platform on Thursday

The jail administration has suspended three jail warders of the Bareilly Central Jail in Uttar Pradesh following an investigation into the matter of an inmate accused of murder possessing a mobile phone on which he hosted a live video on a social media platform.

The probe was ordered after a purported video of a murder accused Asif lodged in Bareilly Central Jail hosting a live video surfaced on a social media platform on Thursday.

In the two-minute-long video, Asif is heard saying, "I am in heaven and enjoying it."

On seeing the video on social media, the deceased's brother met District Magistrate Umesh Pratap Singh on Thursday and gave him a written complaint.

The authorities have also shunted a deputy jailor and sought a written explanation from the two jailors regarding the incident.

The officer said that no objectionable item was recovered in barrack searches held as part of the investigation.

Asif is accused of shooting a public works department (PWD) contractor Rakesh Yadav, 34 to death in broad daylight on 2 December, 2019, in the Sadar Bazar Police Station area of Shahjahanpur.

Another accused Rahul Chaudhury was also accused of having killed Yadav and the duo are currently lodged in Bareilly Central Jail. *—ANI*

4 NH, 279 ROADS CLOSED AS RAIN, SNOW LASH HP

SHIMLA. 16 MARCH

A total of 279 roads, including four national highways, have been closed for vehicular traffic in Himachal Pradesh due to recent snow and rains even though the state witnessed a dry day on Friday.

Manali received traces of snow in the past 24 hours, the MeT said on Saturday, adding a fresh western disturbance is likely to affect the western Himalayan region from the night of 20 March.

About 96 per cent of the total roads are blocked in the high altitude and tribal areas, and a maximum of 249 roads were closed in Tribal Lahaul and Spiti, 11 in Chamba and nine in Kinnaur on Friday night. *—ANI*

PROTEST AHEAD

People gather to take part in a protest against the government, in Slovakia's capital Bratislava. Thousands of Slovaks have rallied in the capital to condemn a plan by the new government of populist Prime Minister Robert Fico to overhaul the country's public broadcasting amid a wave of anti-government protests
PHOTO: PTI

'Modi Ki Guarantee' vs Cong's Nyay guarantees

2024 LS POLLS

Farmers' protest, Ram Mandir consecration ceremony, Electoral Bonds controversy are some of the key issues that are likely to be talked about during the poll campaign by various political parties ***PHOTO: PTI***

Promises galore during poll season and the Lok Sabha elections would be no different with "guarantees" from various political parties set to compete during the high-decibel campaign.Here is a look at the 10 key issues that are likely to be talked about during the poll campaign by various political parties:

* Modi Ki Guarantee: Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is brimming with confidence for bagging a third term, has pitched 'Modi Ki Guarantee' as the main theme of his campaign. It is described as a guarantee for the development of the youth, empowerment of the women, welfare of the farmers, and all those marginalised and vulnerable who have been ignored for decades. It is likely to be the 'catchphrase' in this election.

* Congress' Nyay guarantees: Congress found its mojo back to some extent in the state elections of Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana when it pitched guarantees to the people which clicked electorally. Now for the Lok Sabha polls, the party has strongly pitched for its 5 'Nyay' guarantees aimed at ensuring justice for youth, farmers, women, labourers, as well as participatory justice. Congress' manifesto is likely to be framed around these guarantees and the party would design its campaign around them.

* Unemployment and price rise: INDIA bloc, including the Congress, has been raising the issue of unemployment and rising prices of essential commodities. They have stated repeatedly that lack of jobs is the single biggest issue and have sought to corner the government over the issue. BJP has hit back citing job growth and a fast-growing economy.

* Abrogation of Article 370, Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, (CAA) and Uniform Civil Code: These have been part of BJP's longstanding promises to the people. BJP has and will continue to project its achievement of implementation CAA and the abrogation of Article 370 for Jammu and Kashmir. BJP government in Uttarakhand has also passed a law on the uniform civil code in the state.

* Ram Mandir: The 22 January consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya was marked by BJP with tremendous enthusiasm. The symbolism of Modi leading the ceremony and RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat along with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath being at the forefront during the ceremony was not lost on anybody. Analysts believe that much of BJP's confidence of getting at least 370 seats stems from this 'Ram temple wave'.

* Electoral Bonds Data: The Election Commission has made the data on electoral bonds public. The Congress has demanded a high-level probe by the Supreme Court against the ruling BJP and freezing of its bank accounts for alleged corruption in the electoral bonds scheme. The issue has come to the fore right before the polls and Opposition has seized on it but whether it will work at the grassroots level or not is still to be seen. It would, however, certainly be one of the talking points during the campaign.

* 'Amrit Kaal' versus 'Anyay Kaal': Another likely recurrent campaign theme during the poll season would be BJP's assertion that the Modi dispensation assured good governance, fast paced growth and a vision for the future. Congress on the other hand has dubbed the 10 years of Modi government as 'anyay kaal' marked by "unemployment, rising prices, capture of institutions, attack on the Constitution, and rising economic inequalities". While INDIA bloc is likely to highlight the government's 'failures' to claim that the last 10 years have been about show over substance, BJP would counter it with arguments such as tiding over the pandemic, reducing poverty, and other welfare measures for the poor.

* Farmers issues and legal guarantee of MSP: The farmers' agitation at the borders of Delhi just ahead of polls is also likely to dominate the discourse with the opposition alleging that the tillers had been "betrayed" by the government and promising to provide legal guarantee for MSP if its bloc comes to power.

* Clash of ideologies: This election also marks a crucial phase in what many call the "battle of ideologies" between the BJP and the Congress.

Both parties would present their ideological principles before the people and ask them to choose one.

* Viksit Bharat vision: Modi has asserted that the goal of the country is to become a developed nation.

He has stated that his government's actions are committed to achieve the goal by 2047. The vision for a Viksit Bharat is likely to dominate the BJP's campaign while the opposition has been dubbing it as "another jumla".

However, it would remain a dominant theme during the course of the campaign.

—PTI

SALAR ساڵار

More than 4,000 plastic chemicals hazardous

After a year of trawling through scientific reports and national regulatory databases, scientists funded by the Norwegian Research Council have compiled a list of more than 16,000 'plastic chemicals' — compounds found in plastics or thought to be used in them, including raw ingredients and additives such as stabilizers and colourants.

Of these, at least 4,200 are "persistent, bioaccumulative, mobile and/or toxic", the group found. That "is quite staggering", says lead author Martin Wagner, an environmental toxicologist at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. The group also discovered that hazard data were unavailable for more than 10,000 chemicals, and for more than 9,000 there was no publicly available information about which plastics they are used in.

Solid information on all these chemicals is difficult to come by, in part because industry doesn't always share proprietary information, Wagner says.

The report was released on 14 March, in time for the next round of negotiations for a United Nations treaty on global plastic pollution. Scientists have been campaigning for the treaty, which deals with all aspects of plastic production and waste management, to include a list of plastic polymers and chemicals of concern — some of which are known to leach into food, water and the environment, with impacts for human and ecosystem health. Discussions regarding the treaty continue in Ottawa next month and are scheduled to conclude in Busan, South Korea, in December.

The report notes that although nearly 1,000 concerning chemicals are regulated by global efforts such as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, more than 3,600 are not. The authors assign these chemicals to a 'red list' that should be regulated, they argue. "The message is very clear," says Wagner, who is a member of the Scientists' Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty, a grass-roots group that has formed to advise the treaty process. "Something needs to happen," he adds, although the report's authors decline to be proscriptive about whether treaty delegates should put in place bans or other regulatory measures.

The Plastics Industry Association, a group based in Washington DC that aims to "protect, promote and grow the plastics industry", did not respond to Nature's request for comment. A statement from Kimberly Wise, vice-president of regulatory and technical affairs at the American Chemistry Council (ACC), a trade group in Washington DC representing US chemical companies, says: "Plastic additives provide many important benefits that enhance the function and durability of plastic products, enabling us to do more with less.... Unfortunately, today's report seeks to advance a hazard framework that ignores real-world exposures and paints an incomplete picture for regulators and the public."

Many attempts to regulate chemicals, such as the 1976 US Toxic Substances Control Act, take a risk-based approach, evaluating a chemical by taking into account both its hazards and the likelihood of exposure to it. The authors of the report instead use a more precautionary approach that looks only at hazards — in part because plastics are so pervasive that evaluating exposure would be logistically problematic.

Wagner was surprised by how many chemicals of concern the team found, and how prevalent they are. In the past, many researchers and others have argued that most chemicals of concern were "legacy compounds", no longer really used in plastics production, he says. But the team found convincing evidence that plenty are still in use. "We found more than 400 chemicals of concern across all major polymer types. That was surprising," Wagner adds.

Given the huge number of chemicals of concern and the lack of data for many, the team divides them into 15 groups for priority action. These include phthalates (often used to make polyvinyl chloride more flexible) and bisphenols (used to make durable polycarbonate).

The report also recommends getting companies to be more transparent about what is in their plastics, to fill in many of the information holes. Scientists can help, Wagner says, by finding out about the hazards of chemicals with data gaps and performing meta-analyses on well-studied compounds.

The world also needs better analytical techniques, he says — such as improved bioassays that can measure the effect of a chemical on living organisms.

It's unclear whether the plastics treaty will be completed in December. So far, the negotiations have been hampered by a few petrochemical states that are resisting strong regulation of plastics production, Wagner says. "We're at a stalemate, I'd say," he adds. "My view is, the evidence is very clear. Governments just need to get their act together."

Courtesy, Nature

The report also recommends getting companies to be more transparent about what is in their plastics, to fill in many of the information holes ***PHOTO: PTI***

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Russian passports now universal in Ukraine's occupied areas

He and his parents were among the last in their village to take a Russian passport, but the pressure was becoming unbearable.

By his third beating at the hands of the Russian soldiers occupying Ukraine's Kherson region, Vyacheslav Ryabkov caved. The soldiers broke two of his ribs, but his face was not bruised for his unsmiling passport photo, taken in September 2023.

It wasn't enough.

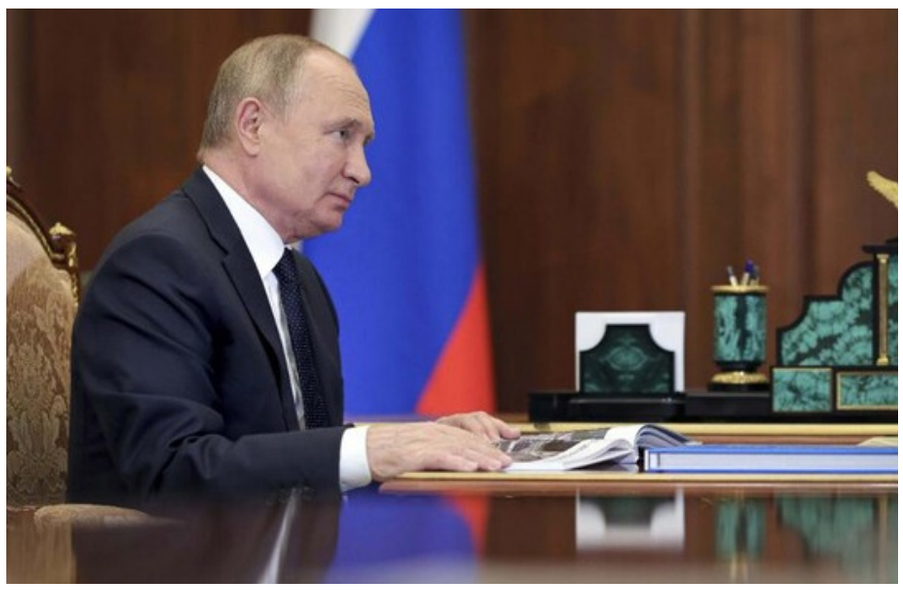
In December, they caught the welder on his way home from work. Then one slammed his rifle butt down on Ryabkov's face, smashing the bridge of his nose.

Why don't you fight for us? You already have a Russian passport, they demanded. The beating continued as the 42-year-old fell unconscious.

Let's finish this off, one soldier said. A friend ran for Ryabok's mother.

Russia has successfully imposed its passports on nearly the entire population of occupied Ukraine by making it impossible to survive without them, coercing hundreds of thousands of people into citizenship ahead of elections Vladimir Putin has made certain he will win, an Associated Press investigation has found. But accepting a passport means that men living in occupied territory can be drafted to fight against the same Ukrainian army that is trying to free them.

A Russian passport is needed to prove property ownership and keep access to health care and retirement income. Refusal can result in losing custody of children, jail or worse. A new Russian law stipulates that anyone in the occupied territories who does not have a Russian passport by 1 July is subject to imprisonment as a foreign citizen.



A Russian passport is needed to prove property ownership and keep access to health care and retirement income. Refusal can result in losing custody of children, jail or worse ***PHOTO: PTI***

Changing the law

The combination of force and enticement when it comes to Russian passports dates to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russian citizenship was automatically given to permanent residents of Crimea and anyone who refused lost rights to jobs, health care and property.

Nine months into the Russian occupation of the peninsula, 1.5 million Russian passports had been issued there, according to statistics issued by the Russian government in 2015. But Ukrainians say it was still possible to function without one for years afterward.

Beginning in May 2022, Russia passed a series of laws to make it easier to obtain passports for Ukrainians, mostly by lifting the usual residency and income requirements. In April 2023 came the punishment: Anyone in the occupied territories who did not accept Russian citizenship would be considered stateless and required to register with Russia's Internal Affairs Ministry.

Russian officials threatened to withhold access to medical care for those without a Russian passport, and said one was needed to prove property ownership. Hundreds of properties deemed abandoned were seized by the Russian government.

Even children are forced to take Russian passports.

A decree signed on 4 January by Putin allows for the fast-tracking of citizenship for Ukrainian orphans and those without parental care, who include children whose parents were detained in the occupied territories. Almost 20,000 Ukrainian children have disappeared into Russia or Russian-held territories, according to the Ukrainian government, where they can be given passports and be adopted as Russian citizens.

Weaponising Healthcare

The international organization Physicians for Human Rights documented at least 15 cases of people being denied vital medical care in occupied territories between February 2023 and August 2023 because they lacked a Russian passport. Some hospitals even featured a passport desk to speed the process for desperate patients. One hospital in Zaporizhzhia oblast was ordered to close because the medical staff refused to accept Russian citizenship.

Alexander Dudka, the Russian-appointed head of the village of Lazurne in the Kherson region, first threatened to withhold humanitarian aid from residents without Russian citizenship. In August, he added medicine to the list of things the waiters would no longer have access to.

As of 1 January, anyone needing medical care in the occupied region must show proof they have mandatory national health insurance, which in turn is only available to Russian citizens.

Importing loyalty

Along with turning Ukrainians into Russians throughout the occupied territories, the Russian government is bringing in its own people. It is offering rock bottom mortgage rates for anyone from Russia who wants to move there, replacing the Ukrainian doctors, nurses, teachers, police and municipal workers who are now gone.

Half of Zhyvohliad's village left, either at the start of the war when things looked dark for the Kherson region or after being deported across the front-line by occupation officials. The school principal's empty home was taken over by a Russian-appointed replacement.

Russia also offered residential certificates and a 100,000 ruble (USD 1,000) stipend to Ukrainians willing to accept citizenship and live in Russia. For many people tired of listening to the daily sounds of battle and afraid of what the future might bring, it looked like a good option.

This again follows Russia's actions after the annexation of Crimea: By populating occupied regions with Russian residents, Russia increasingly cements its hold on territories it has seized by force in what many Ukrainians describe as ethnic cleansing.

Ryabkov said he was offered the housing stipend when he filled out his passport paperwork but turned it down. He knows plenty of people who accepted though.

By the time the Russian soldiers caught Ryabkov in the street, in December, everyone in his village was either gone or had Russian citizenship. When his mother arrived, he was barely recognizable beneath all the blood and the Russian guns were trained on him. She flung herself over his body.

Shoot him through me, she dared them.

They couldn't bring themselves to shoot an elderly woman, and she eventually dragged him home. They started preparations to leave the next day.

It took time, but they made it out using the Russian passports.

When I saw our yellow and blue flag, I started to cry, he said. I wanted to burn the Russian passport, destroy it, trample it.

—PTI

Indian family killed in 'suspicious fire' in Canada

OTTAWA, 16 MARCH

An India-origin couple and their daughter, 16, have died in a "suspicious" fire at their home in Canada's Ontario province. The incident happened on 7 March, however, the police said that they identified the victims on Friday, whose remains were discovered at the site, reported CTV News. The victims have been identified as Rajiv Warikoo, 51, Shilpa Kotha, 47, and Mahek Warikoo, 16. "All three of the deceased persons resided at the address prior to the fire," Peel Police said in a press release. On 7 March, at 1:30 pm, police were called to the area of Big Sky Way and Van Kirk Drive in Brampton at a residential home that was fully engulfed in flames. In the video captured on a neighbour's doorbell camera, large flames shoot out of the roof, and black smoke billows into the sky as a fire truck shows up, as reported by CTV News. *—ANI*

'Imran's party trying to sabotage deal with IMF'

ISLAMABAD, 16 MARCH

Pakistan Information and Broadcasting minister said that some "miscreants" associated with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf tried to sabotage Pakistan's deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), reported Dawn. The deal was crucial for Pakistan's economic stability, the minister emphasised. His statement comes after the IMF refused to accept a letter from the PTI during a protest outside their Washington offices, where officials asked demonstrators to submit the letter via email instead. The PTI in their letter urged IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva to "withhold any further financial assistance or loan disbursements to Pakistan until a credible investigation by an independent body" clears it of all rigging allegations, Dawn reported. Tarar further said that the protesters belonging to the PTI urged the IMF to approve funds to Pakistan only if their jailed leader was released. *—ANI*

PHOTO: ANI

Trump's 'hush money' trial pushed back by 30 days

WASHINGTON, 16 MARCH

The judge overseeing former US President Donald Trump's 'hush money' trial delayed it by 30 days after new evidence was turned over to the parties, The Hill reported. Jury selection was set to begin on 25 March, which would have marked Trump's first criminal trial. However, judge Juan Merchan agreed to delay the trial after prosecutors consented to the one-month delay. The court's decision came after the parties told the judge that the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York turned over more than 70,000 pages of records in recent days, some of which are relevant to the case. The judge, Juan Merchan, said he would adjourn the trial date for 30 days. *—ANI*

Navalny's allies keep fighting against Putin

Putin looks to secure 5th term as President

TALLINN, 16 MARCH

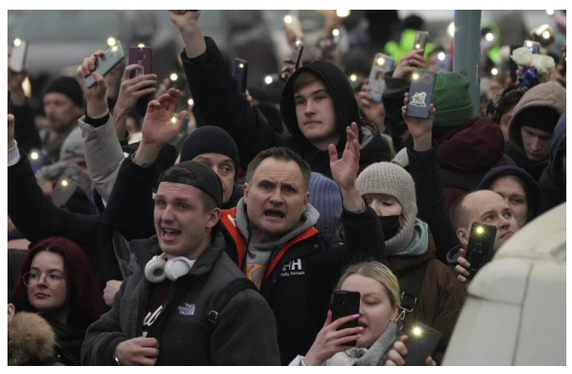
Alexei Navalny's team is used to working independently. The most potent foe of Russian President Vladimir Putin was frequently absent for long stretches after being arrested, assaulted, poisoned, or imprisoned.

But when Navalny died suddenly in February at age 47 in a remote Arctic prison, his team was left with a monumental challenge: sustaining an opposition movement against Putin — who is all but assured to be reelected — without the living example of their defiant and charismatic leader. After the initial shock wore off, Navalny's closest allies returned to the work that cost his freedom and his life: undermining Putin's iron-fisted grip on power.

A significant test will come Sunday, the last of three days that voters can go to the polls in an election that is widely viewed as more of a formality than an exercise in democracy. That's when Navalny's team — with the endorsement of his widow, Yulia Navalnaya — is calling for a protest dubbed "Noon Against Putin." They are asking Russians to flock to polling stations Sunday at noon local time across the country's 11 time zones to demonstrate their discontent with Putin's rule and his war against Ukraine.

"It is a very simple and safe action, it can't be banned," Navalnaya said in a video address. "It will help millions of people to see their like-minded allies and to realize that we are not alone, we're surrounded by people who are also against the war, against corruption and against lawlessness."

Navalny's followers have expressed a wide mix of emotions in the weeks since his death, from renewed inspiration to a sense of defeat. Maria Obukhova of Moscow, who paid tribute to Navalny on Wednesday at the Borisovskoye Cemetery, said the crowds she saw at his funeral — which numbered in the thousands — were motivational. *—AP*



Navalny's followers have expressed a wide mix of emotions in the weeks since his death PHOTO: ANI

Russians cast ballots on Day 2 of election

MOSCOW, 16 MARCH

Voters across Russia cast ballots Saturday on the second day of an election set to formalise six more years of power for President Vladimir Putin, who faces no serious challengers after crushing political dissent over his nearly 25 years of rule. The election comes against the backdrop of a ruthless crackdown that has stifled independent media and prominent rights groups. *—AP*

SHELLING KILLS 2 NEAR UKRAINE BORDER: RUSSIA

KYIV, 16 MARCH

Ukrainian shelling of the Russian city of Belgorod, close to the border with Ukraine, killed two people, Russian officials said Saturday.

A man and a woman died in the attack and three other people were wounded, regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said on Telegram. It was the latest in exchanges of long-range missile and rocket fire in Russia's war on Ukraine.

Five people were also wounded when a Ukrainian drone hit a car in the village of Glotovo, some 2 kilometres (1.25 miles) from the Ukrainian border, Gladkov said. Also on Saturday, a Ukrainian drone attack caused a fire at an oil refinery belonging to Russian oil giant Rosneft in the Samara region, regional Gov. Dmitry Azarov said. He said an attack on another refinery was thwarted. No casualties were reported.

The attacks come a day after a Russian assault on the Ukrainian port city of Odesa killed at least 20 people. The ballistic missile attack blasted homes in the southern city Friday, followed by a second missile that targeted first responders who arrived at the scene, officials said. *—AP*

IN QATAR

200 tonnes of food delivered PHOTO: ANADOLU

Israel-Gaza war: Cease-fire talks may resume today

CAIRO, 16 MARCH

Stalled talks aimed at securing a cease-fire in the war between Israel and Hamas are expected to resume in earnest in Qatar as soon as Sunday, according to Egyptian officials.

The talks would mark the first time both Israeli officials and Hamas leaders join the indirect negotiations since the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. International mediators had hoped to secure a six-week truce before Ramadan started earlier this week, but Hamas refused any deal that wouldn't lead to a permanent cease-fire in Gaza, a demand Israel rejected.

In recent days, however, both sides have made moves aimed at getting the talks, which never fully broke off, back on track. Hamas gave mediators a new proposal for a three-stage plan that would end the fighting, according to two Egyptian officials, one who is involved in the talks and a second who was briefed on them.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to reveal the contents of the sensitive discussions.

The first stage would be a six-week cease-fire that would see the release of 35 hostages — women, those who are ill and older people — held by militants in Gaza in exchange for 350 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Hamas would also release at least five female soldiers in exchange for 50 prisoners, including some serving long sentences on terror charges, for each soldier.

Israeli forces would withdraw from two main roads in Gaza, let displaced Palestinians return to northern Gaza, which has been devastated by the fighting, and allow the free flow of aid to the area, the officials said.

Nearly one in three children under 2 years old in the isolated north have acute malnutrition, the United Nations children's agency said Friday. In the second phase, the two sides would declare a permanent cease-fire and Hamas would free the remaining Israeli soldiers held hostage in exchange for more prisoners, the officials said.

In the third phase, Hamas would hand over the bodies it's holding in exchange for Israel lifting the blockade of Gaza and allowing reconstruction to start, the officials said. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the proposal "unrealistic." However, he agreed to send Israeli negotiators to Qatar for more talks.

Those talks were expected to resume Sunday afternoon, though they could get pushed to Monday, the Egyptian officials said. Netanyahu's government has rejected calls for a permanent cease-fire, insisting it must first fulfill its stated goal of "annihilating Hamas."

Also, the first maritime humanitarian aid shipment to Gaza has been unloaded on to the shore. But how it will be distributed remain unclear.

The US charity behind the mission World Central Kitchen (WCK) is carrying out the mission in co-operation with the United Arab Emirates. *—AP*

TROPICAL MODERNISM

A new exhibition featuring India's Tropical Modernist architecture, at the Victoria & Albert Museum, in London, United Kingdom PHOTO: PTI

EU to use proceeds from Russian assets to fund weapons for Kyiv

BRUSSELS, 16 MARCH

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that the European Union countries have intended to use proceeds from Russian assets frozen in Europe to fund arms purchases for Kyiv, reported TASS.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz while addressing a press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Berlin, said, "We will use the super profits from Russian assets frozen in Europe to financially support the purchase of weapons for Ukraine."

"And the three of us will meet again next week and discuss these issues with our European partners in the European Council," he added.

According to a high-ranking EU representative, the EU is working on the 14th package of sanctions against Russia, which will include measures to combat circumvention of previous restrictions, TASS reported.

"We are already working on the 14th package of sanctions, and it will include measures to combat circumvention of all previous restrictions," he said. He further denied mentioning when the next package of sanctions will be introduced.

Since February 2022, the European Union has introduced 13 packages of individual and economic sanctions against Russia due to the special military operation in Ukraine. *—ANI*

Saudi prince reaffirms support for Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, 16 MARCH

Saudi crown prince and de facto ruler Mohammad bin Salman on Saturday assured newly-elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of full support for Pakistan which has been going through a tough economic phase.

Riyadh has supported cash-strapped Pakistan in recent years by depositing and rolling over large sums of greenbacks to shore up the country's low foreign reserves.

Earlier, Saudi Arabia rolled over its USD 3 billion in deposits at the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) for another year by the end of December 2024. Prime Minister Shehbaz received a congratulatory telephone call from the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, according to a statement by the PM Office. "The Crown Prince thanked the Prime Minister for his kind sentiments. He said both countries enjoyed close brotherly relations and reaffirmed Saudi Arabia's support for Pakistan," it said.

The Prime Minister said Pakistan was proud of its historic, deep-rooted and fraternal ties with Saudi Arabia and the two countries had always stood together through thick and thin. The Prime Minister also conveyed his sincerest wishes and prayers for the health and well-being of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdul Aziz. *—PTI*

Social media cos told to give plan on India polls

WASHINGTON, 16 MARCH

An influential American Senator on Friday asked the US social media companies as to what preparations they have made for elections in India, where social media platforms, including Meta-owned WhatsApp, have a long track record of amplifying misleading and false content. The letter, written by Senator Michael Bennet, a member of the Senate Intelligence and Rules Committees, which has oversight over US elections, comes on the eve of the announcement of elections in India by the Election Commission of India (ECI).

The letter by Bennet to the leaders of Alphabet, Meta, TikTok, and X is addressed to seeking information from these companies about their preparations for elections in various countries, including India.

"The dangers your platforms pose to elections are not new users deployed deepfakes and digitally altered content in previous contests but now, artificial intelligence (AI) models are poised to exacerbate risks to both the democratic process and political stability. The proliferation of sophisticated AI tools has reduced earlier barriers to entry by allowing almost anyone to generate alarmingly realistic images, video, and audio," Bennet wrote.

With over 70 countries holding elections and more than two billion people casting ballots this year, 2024 is the "year of democracy". Australia, Belgium, Croatia, the European Union, Finland, Ghana, Iceland, India, Lithuania, Namibia, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Panama, Romania, Senegal, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States are expected to hold major electoral contests this year.

Senator Michael Bennet pens a letter to prominent social media companies PHOTO: X/ SENATORBENNET

- The letter which has oversight over US elections, comes on the eve of the announcement of elections in India by the Election Commission of India

In his letter to Elon Musk of X, Mark Zuckerberg of Meta, Shou Zi Chew of Tik Tok and Sundar Pichai of Alphabet, Bennet requested information on the platforms' election-related policies, content moderation teams, including the languages covered and the number of moderators on full-time or part-time contracts, and tools adopted to identify AI-generated content. *—PTI*

2 Pak army officers among 7 personnel killed

PHOTO: PTI

PESHAWAR, 16 MARCH

At least seven Pakistan Army soldiers, including two officers, were killed when six terrorists launched multiple suicide attacks on a security check post in the restive tribal district of North Waziristan bordering Afghanistan on Saturday, the military said.

A Lieutenant Colonel and a Captain were killed along with five soldiers. All the six terrorists who attacked the check post in Mir Ali area were shot dead, the army's media wing said in a statement. According to the statement, after the troops foiled the initial attempt of intrusion by unidentified terrorists, they rammed an explosives-laden vehicle into the post, followed by multiple suicide bombing attacks. During the subsequent clearance operation, troops engaged and killed all six terrorists. However, during the intense exchange of fire, Lieutenant Colonel Syed Kashif Ali and Captain Muhammad Ahmed Badar were killed, the statement said.

The military's media wing said a sanitisation operation was being conducted to eliminate any other terrorists present in the area. No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. However, the dreaded Pakistani Taliban have claimed several such attacks in the past.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and President Asif Ali Zardari, in separate statements, condemned the attack. *—PTI*

2019 LEGISLATURE PROTEST

Hong Kong actor among 12 jailed

BANGKOK, 16 MARCH

Hong Kong actor Gregory Wong and 11 other people have been jailed for their role in the storming of the city's legislature during protests in 2019.

Wong was jailed for just over six years - one of the longer sentences handed down by the district court on Saturday. Activists Ventus Lau and Owen Chow were also among those given prison terms linked to the pro-democracy protest.

Meanwhile, two journalists were fined for illegally entering the Legislative Council chamber at the time. Most of the defendants were found guilty of rioting. The incident happened in July 2019 and was seen as a key moment in the pro-democracy protests that erupted over a controversial law allowing the extradition of people to mainland China.

Pro-democracy activists Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow arrive at the Eastern Court by police van after being arrested on suspicion for

Hundreds of protesters entered the building, spray-painting messages on the walls and carrying supplies for those occupying the premises. Extensive damage was done to the building, with portraits of political leaders torn from the walls and furniture smashed.

Judge Li Chi-ho on Saturday said that, as well as physical damage, the storming had caused "long-lasting" social effects. "Aside from the actual damage to the building, it had a symbolic meaning... [which was] challenging the Hong Kong government and even weakening its governance," Mr Li said, according to the AFP news agency.

The protests led to the introduction of a tough security law that made it easier to prosecute protesters and reduced the city's autonomy.

It is thought that more than 100 people have been arrested under the 2020 Beijing-imposed legislation. *—BBC News*

Taiwan repels 4 more Chinese vessels

TAIPEI, 16 MARCH

Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) has once again repelled four Chinese Coast Guard patrol vessels that intruded upon the restricted waters near Kinmen Island, a territory under Taiwan's control, marking the second such incident within a span of 24 hours, as reported by CNA Taiwan.

According to a brief statement from the CGA, Taiwanese coast guard patrol vessels shadowed the Chinese ships after they were detected at 8:54 am, and broadcast warnings until they left Kinmen's prohibited and restricted waters at 10:06 am.

This recent encounter follows a similar incident on Friday when four Chinese Coast Guard vessels were sighted approximately 3 nautical miles south of Kinmen Island and promptly expelled by Taiwan's Coast Guard, as per CNA Taiwan.

Taiwanese coast guard patrol vessels shadowed the Chinese ships after they were detected at 8:54 am PHOTO:PTI

In a statement issued Friday, the China Coast Guard said the ships were "legally" patrolling waters off Kinmen. According to the CGA, the term "prohibited waters" refers to territorial waters, while "restricted waters" refers to a contiguous zone, an area designated by states to bolster their law enforcement capacity in waters just outside their territorial seas. *—ANI*

Govt extends ban on de-oiled rice bran export

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

The Central government has extended the ban on exports of de-oiled rice bran by another four months, according to an official notification put out by the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) dated 15 March. The government had initially banned the export of the commodity derivative in July 2023 for four months and later extended it till March 2024. The move was intended apparently to address inflation in milk prices. De-oiled rice bran, extracted from rice bran, is widely used as a nutrition product for feeding cattle, and other animals. Edible oil industry body The Solvent Extractors Association Of India (SEA) recently requested the government to lift the ban imposed on the export of the commodity derivative. In a letter to the central government, it argued that the total export of DORB constitutes only around 6 per cent of the production, and its restriction has "adversely affected processors and exporters along with paddy farmers, hindering them from realizing better returns on their produce." According to the industry body, India, over the past 30 years, has successfully developed an export market for DORB, primarily serving Vietnam, Thailand, Bangladesh and other Asian countries. *—ANI*

License issued for Ambikapur airport to start operations

RAIPUR, 16 MARCH

Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has issued the aerodrome license for Ambikapur airport in Chhattisgarh's Surguja district to start flight operations, officials said on Saturday. Maa Mahamaya Airport, Ambikapur, has been developed in the 3-C VFR category to expand air services in the state, a public relations department official said. An application, seeking a license to start air services from the airport, was submitted to the DGCA in December 2022. The aviation regulator on Friday granted the license to the state government for Ambikapur Airport, he said. With this, the state now has three licensed airports -- Bilaspur, Jagdalpur and Ambikapur under the regional connectivity scheme (RCS), he added. The license has paved the way for the operation of 72-seater flights from Ambikapur, he added. The state government has already been making efforts to start air service from Ambikapur Airport to Raipur, Bilaspur, Lucknow, Patna, and Ranchi. With the commencement of flights from Ambikapur, tourism and commercial activities in the northern region of the state will get a boost and facilitate the development of the region, the official said. *—PTI*

Indian patent office grants 1L patents in past year

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Indian patent office has granted over 1 lakh patents in the past year on account of steps taken by the government to further strengthen the intellectual property rights ecosystem, an official statement said on Saturday. It also said that there has been a notable surge in Geographical Indication (GI) registrations, demonstrating a threefold increase compared to the previous year As on date, 573 GIs are registered in India. In 2023-24, 98 new GIs have been registered and another 62 will be registered by 31 March this year. So far this fiscal, copyright and design registrations totalled at 36,378 and 27,819 respectively. It added that the Patent Rules, 2024 have been notified and these rules introduced several provisions aimed at simplifying the process of obtaining and managing patents. In the revamped rules, a unique provision for New 'Certificate of Inventorship' has been introduced to acknowledge the contribution of inventors in the patented invention. The time limit to furnish foreign application filing details has been changed from six months from the date of filing of application to three months from the date of issuance of the first examination report. *—PTI*

Govt removes permit for AI model launches

Govt asks firms to inform users on unreliability of AI content

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Fresh advisory fine-tunes the compliance requirement as per IT Rules of 2021 **PHOTO: PTI**

The government has dropped the permit requirement for untested AI models but emphasised the need to label AI-generated content, according to a latest advisory on Artificial Intelligence technology.

Instead of permission for AI models under development, the fresh advisory issued by the Ministry of Electronics and IT fine-tuned the compliance requirement as per IT Rules of 2021.

"The advisory is issued in suppression of advisory...dated 1st March 2024," the advisory said.

It has been observed that IT firms and platforms are often negligent in undertaking due diligence obligations underlined under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, according to the new advisory.The government has asked firms to label content generated using their AI software or platform and inform users about the possible inherent fallibility or unreliability of the output generated using their AI tools.

"Where any intermediary through its software or any other computer resource permits or facilitates synthetic creation, generation or modification of a text, audio, visual or audio-visual information, in such a manner that such information may be used potentially as misinformation or deepfake, it is advised that such information created generated or modified through its software or any other computer resource is labelled....that such information has been created generated or modified using the computer resource of the intermediary," the advisory said.

In case any changes are made by the user, the metadata should be so configured to enable identification of such user or computer resource that has effected such change, it added.After a controversy over a response of Google's AI platform to queries related to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government on March 1 issued an advisory for social media and other platforms to label under-trial AI models and prevent hosting unlawful content.The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, in the advisory issued to intermediaries and platforms, warned of criminal action in case of non-compliance.

The previous advisory has asked the entities to seek approval from the government for deploying under trial or unreliable artificial intelligence (AI) models and deploy them only after labelling them of "possible and inherent fallibility or unreliability of the output generated".

—PTI

RISES BY USD 10.470B

India's forex exchange reserves at 2 year high

MUMBAI, 16 MARCH

Before 8 March week, the foreign exchange reserves rose by USD 6.554 billion to USD 625.626 billion, data showed **PHOTO: X**

India's foreign exchange reserves rose by USD 10.470 billion to USD 636.095 billion in the week that ended on 8 March, as per the latest data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

The foreign exchange kitty rose for a third straight week to hit an over two-year high.

Before 8 March week, the foreign exchange reserves rose by USD 6.554 billion to USD 625.626 billion, data showed.

During the latest week, India's foreign currency assets (FCA), the biggest component of the forex reserves, rose by USD 8.21 billion to USD 562.352 billion, the central bank's weekly statistical data showed.

Gold reserves during the week declined USD 2.299 billion to USD 50.716 billion.

In the calendar year 2023, the RBI added about USD 58 billion to its foreign exchange kitty. In 2022, India's forex kitty slumped by USD 71 billion cumulatively.

Forex reserves or foreign exchange reserves (FX reserves), are assets that are held by a nation's central bank or monetary authority.It is generally held in reserve currencies, usually the US Dollar and, to a lesser degree, the Euro, Japanese Yen, and Pound Sterling.In October 2021, the country's foreign exchange reserves touched an all-time high of about USD 645 billion. Much of the decline, though marginal on a cumulative basis, since then can be attributed to a rise in the cost of imported goods in 2022.

Also, the relative fall in forex reserves could be linked to the RBI's intervention, from time to time, in the market to defend the uneven depreciation in the rupee against a surging US dollar.Typically, the RBI, from time to time, intervenes in the market through liquidity management, including through the selling of dollars, to prevent a steep depreciation in the rupee.

RBI closely monitors the foreign exchange markets and intervenes only to maintain orderly market conditions by containing volatility in the exchange rate. *—ANI*

SEBI relaxes certain disclosure norms for FPIs

MUMBAI, 16 MARCH

PHOTO: PTI

In relief and to facilitate ease of doing business for foreign portfolio investors (FPIs), the Board of capital market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) approved a proposal to relax the timelines for disclosure of material changes by such overseas investors.

The decision was taken at its Board meeting held on Friday.

Currently, FPIs must disclose to their designated depository participant (DDP), material changes to information provided earlier, within seven working days.

Going forward, material changes required to be notified by the FPIs shall be categorised into two buckets, -- Type I and Type II.

Type I material changes, shall continue to be informed by FPIs to their DDP within seven working days of the occurrence of the change. However, supporting documents for the same (if any) shall now be required to be provided within 30 days of such change.

Other material changes (categorised as Type II) shall be informed along with supporting documents (if any) by FPIs to their DDP within 30 days of such changes.

"We welcome SEBI's decision to consider relaxing the timelines for disclosure of material changes by FPIs. The current 7-day deadline poses practical challenges, particularly with multiple teams involved across different jurisdictions. Extending the reporting timeframe to 30 days offers a more reasonable window, greatly benefiting FPIs," said Vivek Singhania, Co-founder at the asset servicing firm Dovetail Group.

SEBI also approved a proposal to exempt additional disclosure requirements for FPIs having more than 50 per cent of their India equity asset under management (AUM) in a single corporate group, in case the concentrated holdings of the FPIs are in a listed company with no identified promoter, though, with certain riders.

—ANI

1cr households under solar scheme: PM

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Modi also asked those who have not yet registered to do so at the earliest **PHOTO: PTI**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said more than one crore households have already registered under the rooftop solar scheme 'PM-Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana', and lauded it as "outstanding news".

"Registrations have been pouring in from all parts of the nation. Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh have seen over 5 lakh regulations," he said in a post on 'X'.

Modi also asked those who have not yet registered to do so at the earliest, noting that the initiative promises substantial reductions in electricity expenses for households along with ensuring energy production.

"It's poised to encourage Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE) on a grand scale, contributing to a better planet," he said.

The Union Cabinet, chaired by Modi, last month approved the scheme with a total outlay of Rs 75,021 crore for installing rooftop solar panels and providing free electricity up to 300 units every month for one crore households.

"In about a month since it was launched, over 1 crore households have already registered themselves for the PM-Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana...Those who haven't registered yet should also do so at the earliest," Modi said on 'X'.

Modi had launched the scheme on 13 February.The scheme provides a central financial assistance (CFA) of 60 per cent of system cost for 2 kW systems and 40 per cent of additional system cost for systems between 2 kW to 3 kW capacity. *—PTI*

3 INDEPENDENT DIRECTORS FOR ZEE ENTERTAINMENT

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Zee Entertainment Enterprises shareholders have approved the appointment of three independent directors to the company's board. Special resolutions for approval of the appointment of - Uttam Prakash Agarwal, Shishir Babubhai Desai and Venkata Ramana Murthy Pinisetti were passed with majority by the shareholders of Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd (ZEEL) through a postal ballot process.

All three special resolutions received over 75 per cent of the total number of valid votes, according to the Consolidated Report of the Scrutinizer shared by the company to bourses.

"This outcome of the remote e-voting process concluded on 15th March 2024 reflects the shareholders' confidence in the Board of the Company," ZEEL said in a statement later.

On 5 February, ZEEL sent a postal ballot notice to seek approval of the shareholders for the appointment of three independent directors for their first term of three years, which is from 17 December 2023, to 16 December, 2026.

.— PTI

Boeing said that they defer to the investigation authorities on any potential findings **PHOTO: PTI**

Boeing tells pilots to check seats after Latam incident

VIRGINIA, 16 MARCH

- **It comes after 50 people were hurt this week when a 787 dropped suddenly during a Latam Airlines flight, during which people where thrown against the roof of the plane**

Boeing has told airlines operating 787 Dreamliners that pilots need to check their seats as an investigation into an incident on a Latam flight continues.

It comes after 50 people were hurt this week when a 787 dropped suddenly during a Latam Airlines flight.

During the incident people were thrown against the roof of the plane, which was travelling from Australia to New Zealand.

Boeing said: "The investigation of Flight LA800 is ongoing and we defer to the investigation authorities on any potential findings."

"We have taken the precautionary measure of reminding 787 operators of a service bulletin issued in 2017 which included instructions for inspecting and maintaining switches on flight deck seats."

It recommended that operators perform an inspection of the switches "at the next maintenance opportunity".

Chilean-Brazilian carrier Latam Airlines said it "continues to work in coordination with the authorities in order to support the ongoing investigation".

The aircraft was scheduled to fly on from Auckland to Santiago, the capital of Chile.

The departure was cancelled and a new flight scheduled for Tuesday.

The incident comes after a door panel came off a Boeing plane in January this year, with a report in February finding bolts meant to secure the panel were missing.

And this week, a former Boeing employee known for raising concerns about the firm's production standards was found dead in the US. *—BBC News*

EXPANSION PLANS

Kerala-based startup to deploy 1,200 EV chargers

KOCHI, 16 MARCH

Kerala-based energy tech Startup, 'chargeMOD', has announced its expansion plans and said it will deploy 1,200 more EV chargers across India and 600 more in Kerala.

The company, in an announcement made earlier this week, said it was planning to set up an additional 1,000 slow chargers and 200 fast chargers across various states in India and to establish an additional 500 slow chargers and 100 fast chargers in Kerala.

It said this was excluding the existing 1,500 charging stations in Kerala and 2,000 stations across India.

'chargeMOD' is set to introduce Ultra Fast Chargers with capacities ranging from 120 kW to 340 kW, further enhancing charging speeds and convenience for EV users across the country, the company said in a release.

CEO and Co-Founder of 'chargeMOD', M Ramanunni said the startup led by four engineering students has now become an entrepreneurial powerhouse.

"Despite the hurdles posed by inexpensive imported chargers, 'chargeMOD' remains steadfast in our dedication to striking an equilibrium between quality and affordability. By placing utmost importance on reliability and efficiency, 'chargeMOD' endeavours to maintain its position as an architect within the EV charging sector," he was quoted in a release.

The strategic placement of AC slow chargers within a 5 km radius and DC fast chargers within a 50 km radius underscores chargeMOD's dedication to accessibility and convenience for EV users nationwide.The company claimed that with over 120 new subscribers joining their network daily, chargeMOD has enabled over four million kilometres of emission-free travel, preventing over 995 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions and saving more than 160,000 litres of gasoline.

The startup, is the first company in Kerala to develop an indigenous mobile app for charging stations. *—PTI*

Real Estate may touch $1.3T by 2034

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

The real estate sector is estimated to reach a market size of USD 1.3 trillion by 2034 and USD 5.17 trillion by 2047, according to a report by realtors body CREDAI.

The current market size of Indian real estate is Rs 24 lakh crore (around USD 300 billion), split between residential and commercial segments in the ratio of 80 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, it said in a statement on Saturday.

According to CREDAI, Indian real estate will have a significant impact on the Indian economy in the coming years "with the sector projected to reach USD 1.3 trillion (13.8 per cent of projected GDP) by FY 2034 and USD 5.17 trillion (17.5 per cent of projected GDP) by 2047."

Among the residential segment, 61 per cent of current supply is above the cost of Rs 45 lakh.

The average home area is also increasing at 11 per cent on an annual basis.

CREDAI also projected that there will be 7 crore units of additional housing demand by 2030.*—PTI*

WARN COMPANIES

EU backs law against forced labour in supply chains

BRUSSELS, 16 MARCH

The agreement came only after substantial changes were made to the original text **PHOTO: PTI**

European Union countries have agreed to a law requiring companies to ensure their supply chains do not cause environmental damage or use forced labour.

The agreement came only after substantial changes were made to the original text.

Critics argue that the law has now been diluted too much to be effective.

The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) will mean European companies have to document that products they import adhere to environmental and human rights standards, such as not involving child labour.

They will also be required to prevent or minimise potential harm and to communicate their findings.

However, compromises made following weeks of negotiations on the draft text mean only larger businesses that have 1,000 employees or more and which have a net turnover of at least €450m (£384m; $489m) will be affected.

The draft legislation must be approved by the European Parliament to become law - and MEPs are expected to back it.

Businesses will then be given time to implement the new practices.

Friday's approval of the draft legislation comes after the bloc failed twice in February to get it approved.

Among the countries that objected to the original text were Germany and Italy, which feared it would hit their industries harder due to their high numbers of small and medium businesses.There were also concerns that companies would remove themselves from the EU due to bureaucracy and legal risks.

Environmental and human rights campaigners welcomed the move to improve firms' accountability, but voiced disappointment with the draft law.

—BBC News

KNOW YOUR TEAMS

RAJASTHAN ROYALS

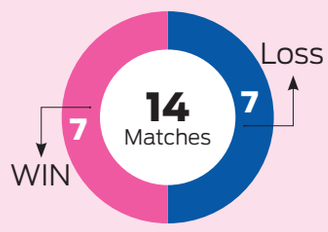
With commendable performances over the last few years, the team is ready to head into IPL 2024 season, eyeing for their second trophy post their inaugural win in 2008

JOS BUTTLER
Key Batsman

28 Avg (Average)	95 HS (Highest Score)	14 Innings (Innings)
139 SR (Strike Rate)	42 4s (Fours)	14 6s (sixes)

STRENGTHS
Explosive opening batters like Buttler and Jaiswal can give a strong start to the team. Bowling lineup including Boult, Ashwin and Chahal, can deliver under any situation

2023 IPL RECORDS



WEAKNESS
Lack of economical pace bowlers might be fatal for the team. Another concern would be their main players' form would be the main players' form

YUZVENDRA CHAHAL
Key Bowler

14 Innings (Innings)	21 Wkts (Wickets)	8.17 Eco (Economy)
17/4 BBI – Best Bowling in innings (Runs/ Wickets)	3 4W (Wickets)	

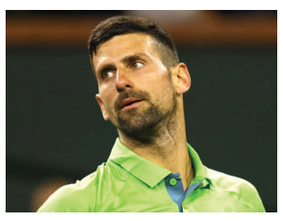
SQUAD
Sanju Samson(C), Jos Buttler, Shimron Hetmyer, Dhruv Jurel, Kunal Singh Rathore, Tom Kohler-Cadmore, Riyan Parag, Shubham Dubey, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Donovan Ferreira, Rovman Powell, Abid Mushtaq, Adam Zampa, Avesh Khan, Kuldeep Sen, Nandre Burger, Navdeep Saini, Prasidh Krishna, Ravichandran Ashwin, Sandeep Sharma, Trent Boult, Yuzvendra Chahal

SCHEDULE

24 March vs LSG	28 March vs DC	1 April vs MI	6 April vs RCB
Jaipur	Jaipur	Mumbai	Jaipur

Novak Djokovic withdraws from Miami Open

MIAMI GARDENS 16 MARCH



Djokovic **PHOTO: AFP**

Top-ranked Novak Djokovic will skip the Miami Open, saying less than a week after a surprise loss at Indian Wells that he needs to balance his "private and professional schedule."

Djokovic's announcement Saturday on his social media accounts follows his 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 defeat to unheralded Luca Nardi on Monday in the third round of the BNP Paribas Open.

"At this stage of my career, I'm balancing my private and professional schedule. I'm sorry that I won't experience some of the best and most passionate fans in the world," Djokovic wrote.

Nardi, who is ranked No. 123, became the lowest-ranked player to beat Djokovic in a Grand Slam or ATP Masters 1000 level event, surpassing No. 122 Kevin Anderson in 2008 in Miami.

The 20-year-old Italian got into the field as a "lucky loser," which is a player who stumbled on the final hurdle in qualifying but made it into the main draw as a replacement for an injured player who pulled out before the first round. The 36-year-old Djokovic is a six-time champion in Miami. —*AP*

In-form DC looks to win maiden WPL title

Don't want comparisons with the men's team: Smriti

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Mandhana **PHOTO: PTI**

In-form Delhi Capitals, led by the inspirational Meg Lanning, would hope to be second-time lucky and lift their maiden Women's Premier League title when they take on a plucky Royal Challengers Bangalore in the summit clash here on Sunday.

After missing out on the title in WPL's inaugural edition last year, losing by seven wickets to Mumbai Indians in the final, DC looked like a rejuvenated side this year.DC has been in superb form this year, topping the five-team league standings with 12 points from eight matches.

Lanning has led DC from the front, scoring 308 runs from eight innings, while South African all-rounder Marizanne Kapp and Australian left-arm spinner Jess Jonassen are the highest wicket-takers for the side with 11 scalps each.DC's only two defeats this season came against Mumbai Indians UP Warriorz.

Leaving aside those two matches, they have enjoyed a near-perfect campaign. Going into the final, they will start as favorites, having never lost to RCB in four meetings.

Royal Challengers Bangalore skipper **Smriti Mandhana** doesn't want to put too much pressure on her side ahead of the Women's Premier League final against Delhi Capitals here on Sunday, and added that she is not in the mood for comparisons with their men's team counterparts in the IPL. The RCB men's team has failed to win a single IPL title in the last 17 years, finishing runners-up thrice (2009, 2011, 2016).Match starts @7.30 PM. —*PTI*

GRITTY RCB TAKES ON OPTIMISTIC DC

Royal Challengers Bengaluru	Delhi Capitals
SQUAD	**SQUAD**
Smriti Mandhana (C), Asha Shobana, Disha Kasat, Ellyse Perry, Nadine de Klerk, Indrani Roy, Shradda Pokharkar, Renuka Singh, Richa Ghosh, Shreyanka Patil, Sophie Devine, Georgia Wareham, Kate Cross, Ekta Bisht, Shubha Satheesh, S Meghana, Simran Bahadur, Sophie Molineux .	Meg Lanning (C), Taniya Bhatia, Laura Harris, Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Alice Capsey, Marizanne Kapp, Shikha Pandey, Annabel Sutherland, Jess Jonassen, Minnu Mani, Poonam Yadav, Arundhati Reddy, Titas Sadhu, Radha Yadav, Ashwani Kumari, Aparna Mondal, V Sneha Deepthi.
FACE TO FACE MATCHES	**FACE TO FACE MATCHES**
18 Won · 11 Lost · 1 No result	11 Won · 18 Lost · 1 No result
215 Highest score · 137 Lowest score	196 Highest score · 95 Lowest score
KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR	**KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR**
ELLYSE PERRY: Inng: 8; Runs: 312; Average: 62.40; SR: 130.54	SMRITI MANDHANA: Inng: 9; Runs: 269; Average: 29.88; Strike Rate: 145.40
	MEG LANNING: Inng: 8; Runs: 308; Average: 38.50; SR: 125.20
	SHAFALI VERMA: Inng: 8; Runs: 265; Average: 37.85; SR: 155.88

Match starts today at **7.30** pm · Viewing options: Jio Cinema, Sports18 · Stadium: Arun Jaitley · Seating capacity: **35,200**

WINNERS PRICE MONEY: ₹6 CRORE

Iga Swiatek inset Maria Sakkari **PHOTO: AFP**

Iga Swiatek cruises into the Indian Wells final

PUNE, 16 MARCH

Top seed Iga Swiatek will face Maria Sakkari in the Indian Wells women's final after a near-flawless performance to cruise past Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk 6-2, 6-1.

Sakkari found the going tougher, having to overcome a Coco Gauff fightback to book a place in the decider with a 6-4, 6-7 (5), 6-2 victory in a lengthy, rain-interrupted battle. The final between Swiatek and Sakkari will be a repeat of the 2022 showdown when the current world No. 1 lifted the Indian Wells trophy for the first time.

Swiatek made her intentions clear early on against Kostyuk with an aggressive start to claim a break for a 2-1 lead. She pulled further away when Kostyuk hit a double fault two games later, wrapping up the opening set in 31 minutes.

The 21-year-old Kostyuk was put through the wringer again by Swiatek at the start of the second set. A powerful smash at the net gave Swiatek another break. The four-times grand slam champion withstood some pressure from the 31st seed in the next game before building a 3-0 advantage.

Kostyuk appeared to struggle with a left foot problem and a medical timeout only delayed the inevitable, as Swiatek eased to a WTA Tour-leading 19th match win of the season, finishing off the match with a forehand winner. "For sure I'm happy with the performance. I think it was the cleanest match I played here. It's already a great tournament," Swiatek said.

In the second semi-final, US Open champion Gauff broke Sakkari early but the No. 9 seed fought back to take a first set interrupted by a short rain delay 6-4. A lengthy break for the weather delayed the start of the second set, Sakkari settling quickest on the resumption and breaking the American twice to lead 5-2. —*AP*

Lifter Achinta caught entering women's hostel

NEW DELHI, 16 MARCH

Commonwealth Games gold medallist weightlifter Achinta Sheuli has been expelled from the Paris Olympics preparatory camp after he was caught entering the women's hostel at night at NIS Patiala.The disciplinary breach occurred on Thursday night. The 22-year-old, who competes in the men's 73kg weight class, was caught by security personnel

Lakshya Sen outlasts Lee Zii Jia to enter S/fs

BIRMINGHAM, 16 MARCH

Lakshya Sen **PHOTO: AFP**

India's Lakshya Sen displayed great mental resolve on his way to a stunning win over former champion Malaysia's Lee Zii Jia to progress to the men's singles semifinals of the All England Championships in Birmingham. The 22-year-old Indian, who had finished runner-up in the 2022 edition, produced good variations while attacking and kept fighting to outlast Lee 20-22, 21-16, 21-19 in an absorbing quarterfinal that lasted 71 minutes on Friday.

"It was a really good match and happy to be on the winning side. It was all about keeping the nerve. I knew he has the quality to come back and give a tough fight," Sen said.

"Even when I was 18-14 up, I knew if I played a little bit loose, he would grab the opportunity. For me, it was important to dictate the pace. In the end, it was about not giving him an open chance to hit and keep the shuttle down." World no. 18 Sen, the reigning Commonwealth Games champion, will take on Indonesia's world no. 9 Jonatan Christie in the semifinals. Sen played four three-game matches last week at the French Open before engaging in two back-to-back long matches in the past couple of days but despite that, he was able to maintain a high pace. "It (physically) was really good. The way I played last week and now too. Now it is all about recovering as there is not much time. —*AP*

PHOTO: AFP

SL appoints Aaqib as fast bowling coach until the T20 WC

COLOMBO, 16 MARCH

Sri Lanka on Saturday appointed former Pakistan pacer Aaqib Javed as their fast-bowling coach until the completion of the ICC T20 World Cup 2024 in June.Javed, a 1992 World Cup winner, is currently serving as the Director of Cricket Operations and head coach of the Lahore Qalandars in the Pakistan Super League (PSL)."We warmly welcome Aaqib and believe that his immense international experience, both in playing and coaching, will help our bowlers come into good shape ahead of the upcoming major international competitions, such as the ICC Men's T20 World Cup," Ashley De Silva, the SLC CEO, said in a press release. —*AP*

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Leipzig in top 4 with 5-1 thrashing of Cologne

MADRID, 16 MARCH

Team RB Leipzig in action **PHOTO: X**

- A goal and an assist from Xavi Simons and a Lois Openda brace helped RB Leipzig thump Cologne 5-1 away on Friday to leapfrog Borussia Dortmund into the top four. Simons produced yet another masterclass as Leipzig's attacking fulcrum in midfield while showcasing his understanding with fellow summer arrival Openda, who lifted his league goal tally to 19 this season.

A goal and an assist from Xavi Simons and a Lois Openda brace helped RB Leipzig thump Cologne 5-1 away on Friday to leapfrog Borussia Dortmund into the top four. Simons produced yet another masterclass as Leipzig's attacking fulcrum in midfield while showcasing his understanding with fellow summer arrival Openda, who lifted his league goal tally to 19 this season.

Simons joined Leipzig on a season-long loan in the summer from parent club Paris Saint-Germain.

Leipzig has been increasingly reliant on the Dutchman this season, with coach Marco Rose saying this week he was "very optimistic" the 20-year-old would stay beyond the season.

Leipzig defender David Raum, who was named in Julian Nagelsmann's Germany squad on Thursday, told DAZN: "Of course, it was fun in the end, but it was hard work.

"We didn't take our chances in the first half but in the second half we did and you can see what potential we have when we do."

The three points could prove crucial as Leipzig duke it out with Dortmund for the final Champions League spot.

Dortmund, now two points behind Leipzig, can retake their lead with a win when they host sixth-placed Eintracht Frankfurt on Sunday.

"A very good away performance. We scored some nice goals, some very nice goals," said Rose.

Fresh from winning two in a row for the first time this season, Leipzig brought the energy early and hit the lead after 15 minutes through Simons.

Simons finished off a sublime short passing move, with Dani Olmo laying the ball onto Benjamin Sesko who found the goalscorer.

Cologne hit back just three minutes later when Sargis Adamyan turned in a corner at the far post.

Openda's 26th-minute strike was ruled out for offside but the Belgian broke through midway through the second half, tapping in a perfect Simons pass.

Openda scored again just four minutes later, heading in a floating Raum chip for his 19th league goal of the season.

"At training sometimes he bangs them over the fence and into the forest but today he put it in perfectly," Raum said after the match.

Amadou Haidara blasted in a low shot to add a fourth with 20 minutes remaining before Yussuf Poulsen, subbed on for Openda, added a fifth.

Cologne's loss, their 14th in 26 games this season, leaves them in the relegation play-off spot and seven points from safety with eight games remaining. —*AP*

Last-gasp Bologna consolidates 4th spot at Empoli

LONDON, 16 MARCH

Bologna continued their surprise Serie A charge to a Champions League spot on Friday after a stoppage-time winner by Giovanni Fabbian gave them a 1-0 win at Empoli. Substitute Fabian scored on the rebound four minutes into added time to move Bologna six points clear of Roma in the fifth spot, provisionally. The narrow victory comes at a crucial time in the season for Bologna, who last week were defeated 1-0 at home to runaway leaders Inter Milan after a run of six successive wins.

Thiago Motta's side now find themselves just four points off Juventus in third, ahead of the Old Lady's clash with 12th-placed Genoa on Sunday.

Bologna are bidding to qualify for the Champions League for the first time, although the seven-time Italian champions played one round in the old European Cup in 1964, the same year that they most recently won the Scudetto.

Last season's ninth place was the highest Bologna had finished in Serie A for over a decade.

Defeat leaves Empoli one point above the relegation zone in 17th place. —*AP*

Serie A: Bologna defeat Empoli 1-0 **PHOTO: AFP**